













**THOSE WHO WALK IN DARKNESS**

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**PERLEY POORE SHEEHAN**



# THOSE WHO WALK IN DARKNESS

BY

PERLEY POORE SHEEHAN

AUTHOR OF "THE BUGLER OF ALGIERS,"  
"GOD'S MESSENGER," ETC.



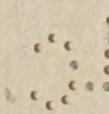
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TO HIM WHO TOLD ME THIS HISTORY COMPLETE  
AND INSPIRED ME TO SET IT DOWN,  
MY FRIEND AND COLLABORATOR,  
ROBERT H. DAVIS,  
THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED  
WITH GRATEFUL AFFECTION.



## CONTENTS

### PART ONE: BEFORE DAWN

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE KEEPER OF THE GATE . . . . .	II
II.	THE TERROR BY NIGHT . . . . .	17
III.	MYRRH AND FRANKINCENSE . . . . .	21
IV.	THE SONG OF SONGS . . . . .	26
V.	THE PIPES OF PAN . . . . .	33
VI.	GHOSTS AND VISIONS . . . . .	40
VII.	THE SPIRIT HE CALLED . . . . .	46
VIII.	AN ANGEL OUT OF DARKNESS . . . . .	52
IX.	AS THROUGH A TELESCOPE . . . . .	58
X.	NIGHT-WORK . . . . .	64
XI.	THE DAY OF JUDGMENT . . . . .	69
XII.	WHEN IT WAS YET DARK . . . . .	74
XIII.	OUT OF THE SHADOWS . . . . .	80

### PART TWO: THE SCARLET GHOST

I.	FROM ANOTHER WORLD . . . . .	85
II.	THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT . . . . .	91
III.	CONCERNING NEW YORK . . . . .	98
IV.	KITH AND KIN . . . . .	104
V.	DOMINION . . . . .	109
VI.	A PAIR OF HAMES . . . . .	114
VII.	MIDSUMMER MADNESS . . . . .	119
VIII.	A CROCK OF CREAM . . . . .	124
IX.	HAIRCLOTH AND GHOSTS . . . . .	133
X.	AS BETWEEN NEIGHBORS . . . . .	139
XI.	WITH HORN AND HOOF . . . . .	144
XII.	THE RED ECLIPSE . . . . .	149
XIII.	AS TO "MYSTERIES AND MISERIES" . . . . .	154
XIV.	THE SANDWICH KING . . . . .	160

CHAPTER	PAGE
XV. MR. WORLDLY WISE . . . . .	166
XVI. WHAT IS LOVE? . . . . .	171
XVII. EYES OF THE FLESH . . . . .	176
XVIII. WITH EVIL INTENT . . . . .	183
XIX. PENDING SETTLEMENT . . . . .	188
XX. JUDGMENT . . . . .	193
XXI. HIS GUARDIAN ANGEL . . . . .	198
XXII. VICE VERSA . . . . .	204
XXIII. BY WAY OF FAREWELL . . . . .	210
XXIV. FLIGHT . . . . .	216
XXV. "YOU!—" . . . . .	222
XXVI. LESLIE SHAINES . . . . .	227
XXVII. THE RED FLAG . . . . .	232
XXVIII. "IF YE HAVE FAITH" . . . . .	238

## PART THREE: INTO THE LIGHT

I. THE BEAUTY MART . . . . .	243
II. PURE ROMANCE . . . . .	250
III. INSTINCTS MATERNAL . . . . .	257
IV. RIGHT AND WRONG . . . . .	263
V. THE MAN WITH THE SCAR . . . . .	271
VI. BY WAY OF AMENDS . . . . .	277
VII. THE OLD PLACE . . . . .	283
VIII. THE LOCKED DOOR . . . . .	290
IX. IN OTHER HANDS . . . . .	297
X. A CALL FOR HELP . . . . .	304
XI. UNDER FALSE PRETENSES . . . . .	312
XII. TELEGRAMS . . . . .	320
XIII. ALEC SEES THE LIGHT . . . . .	329
XIV. CRULLERS AND LOVE . . . . .	336
XV. BLACK OR WHITE? . . . . .	348
XVI. BY ROYAL COMMAND . . . . .	353
XVII. THE COSMIC CENTRE . . . . .	361
XVIII. REVELATION . . . . .	372
XIX. "VENGEANCE IS MINE" . . . . .	378
XX. "WHAT GOD HATH CLEANSED" . . . . .	385
XXI. DAY! . . . . .	392

# **THOSE WHO WALK IN DARKNESS**



## PART ONE: BEFORE DAWN

### Chapter I

#### THE KEEPER OF THE GATE

FIGURATIVELY speaking, there are three kinds of darkness: the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of necessity, and the darkness of choice. There may be other varieties, of course; but these are the three which generally enshroud the lives of dwellers in New York.

Sometimes those who knock about in these three kinds of darkness run into each other with queer results. Such contacts are often romantic. Very easily they may be tragic. But, in no case, perhaps, are they to be taken too seriously. Sooner or later the darkness breaks, the light rushes in.

And, in any event, they merely show that in New York, as elsewhere in the world, Joy and Sorrow continue to play the ancient game of Blind-Man's Buff.

Every now and then the landlady of Alec Breen's place of residence would pause in the midst of what she was doing and peer out into the darksome hall. She was a mysterious old creature, flabby and unkempt. The fact that there was a glass panel in her door might have heightened the suggestion that she was some sort of a queer and uncouth fish looking through the side of a dusky aquarium.

## 12 Those Who Walk in Darkness

To the imaginative, the whole place would have suggested an aquarium—pallid light reflected from above, a certain dampness about everything, an indefinite fishiness in the atmosphere.

Alec Breen, however, would have been the last person on earth to think of such a thing. He descended the last flight of stairs crisply and turned toward the landlady's door. He was nursing something in the side pocket of his coat. He entered.

"Hello there, Mrs. Moss," he cried.

"How do you do?" she responded briefly.

"You've been waiting for me," he snickered playfully.

"I'm not saying I wasn't," she came back, taking him in with her fishy eyes.

Alec put the fingers of his free hand into his vest pocket and brought forth a prepared packet of two one-dollar bills which he deposited on the red-cotton cover of his landlady's table. Mrs. Moss's actions were chiefly phlegmatic, but her eyes and her hands were swift as they seized upon the money. Then once more she was phlegmatic—cautious, one would have said.

"Set down," she invited.

Alec finally removed his nobby straw hat. He was a young man, blond and slender, with a rather prominent concave nose and eyes of an indefinite greenish grey. His fair hair was sleeked up and back in an elaborate scallop. He sat down in a low rocking-chair and began to rock. He had kept his left hand in the pocket of his coat. He was smiling.

"Suppose I didn't bring you my rent some Thursday," he speculated.

"I guess I'd have to give you your walking-papers," Mrs. Moss declared, with abstract justice.

"You ain't saying that you would, though; are you?"

Alec came back. He carefully removed his hand from his pocket.

"No, I ain't saying that I would."

She had been watching his movements. She displayed a slight start of interest as he held up two eggs. She also had seated herself.

"Don't never say I never gave you nothing," he grinned, as he rocked forward and slipped the eggs into her lap. "They're fresh. You don't see eggs like that every day."

"What do *you* know about eggs?"

"Me?" Alec exclaimed. "Why, I'm the greatest little old egg-expert in New York. I come from the place where they make 'em. It's funny, your never asking me where I come from, nor anything."

"There's no give to ask questions so long as folks pay me what they owe me," she answered righteously, as she fondled the eggs. "It's none of my business where my lodgers come from. It's enough bother keeping my house filled as it is."

"You needn't be scared so far as I'm concerned," Alec assured her. "I'm from Chenango County. That's where I come from. Eggs? Say, I used to go out looking for them up there in the barn. I could pick out the fresh ones every time, in the dark, down in a dog-gone manger where the old hen was setting. That's where I learned to cook, too. Old man never had a hired girl. Didn't need one. I learned how to rassle a skillet before I was ten years old. That's how I came to catch on so quick here in New York."

"You've caught on, all right," Mrs. Moss complimented him cautiously.

"Bet your sweet life!" said Alec. "I got a job the first day I landed here, held it down ever since. Boss says

## 14 Those Who Walk in Darkness

himself he never had any one who could touch me. I can get sixteen sandwiches out of one loaf of bread. The guy who was there before me could only get eleven. I can smear a fried egg out so wide it looks like a horse-blanket. I can toss the wheats so that a lot of guys order them merely for to see me do it. And, as for watching the change!—Say! When any one tries to slip me a plugged nickel or a lead quarter, they get it back so fast it burns their hand. And I was thinking of you when we got in a case of eggs. I see right away that two of them had got in by mistake—white Leghorns, laid no longer ago than day before yesterday—so I copped them out for you.”

For some time it had been manifest that Mrs. Moss's professional discretion was at grips with her womanly curiosity. Curiosity won.

“What line are you in, anyway?”

“What line am I in?” Alec crowed. “Me? I run a lunch-cart down in Union Square—an owl wagon—one of these all-night dumps. I picked out the job the first day I struck town, and I've kept it ever since. I'm a wizard. I'm the original sandwich-king. Do you get me? Easy money, and nothing to do but cook, and wash up a few dishes. Why, it's the greatest little old job in the world! I wouldn't go back to Chenango County if they gave me a farm. And I'm making the coin, too. Things look so good I've written for a friend to come down here and share my flat with me.”

“Lady or gent?” flashed Mrs. Moss.

“You get me wrong,” said Alec, obviously tickled. “Girls don't interest me. I haven't got time to monkey with them. I'm running a lunch-wagon. I'm doing it right. You can't manage a chow-foundry and think about something else. This friend is a guy who may break into

the same business. He's an old pal of mine. We were born in the same village. He's a nice boy. You'll like him."

"Why don't you take a couple of extra rooms?" inquired Mrs. Moss, with an eye to business.

"What's the use?"

"It would give you a bath-room."

"Ah, that listens all right," said Alec; "but we can get along without the fancy stuff."

"Still you'll need an extra bed," Mrs. Moss urged.

"Name the price."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Alec. I like you. You're slick. You're making money. I'll open that door from your flat into the vacant bath-room and put an extra bed in for you, and we'll call it twelve dollars a month. That's only a dollar more a week. Put on a little style. Style's what counts."

"Darned if I don't fall for it," Alec consented. He laughed. "I've been telling this friend of mine what a swell life I've been leading down here."

They had just reached this happy juncture when there was a slight, pecking knock at the door. It was just such a sound as a child might have made on the glass of an aquarium. And the light wasn't favourable from the place where Mrs. Moss sat. She peered over in the direction of the knocking like a roused pike. Visible beyond the glass over there was a pair of large dark eyes in a rather small face, the whole conveying a fugitive impression of timidity and innocence.

"Come in, Miss Swan," Mrs. Moss called.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Swan, with a slight catching of her breath. "I thought you were alone."

Her voice was vibrant. She had hesitated at the door. She was nineteen, graceful, slight, not very large. There

## 16 Those Who Walk in Darkness

was a lingering quality of alarm about her, a proneness to flash her shadowy eyes, even after she was well within the room.

“Don’t mind me,” Alec Breen exclaimed, getting to his feet and studying a cheap lithograph on the wall. “I got to duck.”

Again the girl looked at him.

To most men she would have appeared singularly attractive, moving. She was simply and soberly dressed. She wore a small toque. Her dark hair was smoothed down half over her shapely ears and twisted into a simple knot. Her thin jacket and filmy waist, her soft, short skirt and her little, low-heeled boots—all these revealed a fine and tender suppleness. And there was always that mysterious, wondering look in her eyes.

But, clearly, she didn’t appeal to Alec. He had turned from the lithograph. He was humming a little tune. He smiled at Mrs. Moss.

“My friend’s coming to-morrow morning,” he said. “I guess you can do what you said.”

“Thank you, Mr. Breen. I’ll see to it myself.”

“Ta-ta,” said Alec; and he was on his way.

## Chapter II

### THE TERROR BY NIGHT

I'VE brought you the money, Mrs. Moss," said Miss Swan, after Alec had closed the door behind him.

Her own words seemed to surprise her. She appeared to listen to them as to something strange. The startled look came into her eyes. She recovered herself, established an air of challenging nonchalance.

Mrs. Moss waited patiently. She was neutral.

"Six dollars," said Miss Swan hastily, and she pulled a crumpled wad of bills from her small purse. "I think I should really take a cheaper flat if you have one."

Mrs. Moss straightened the bills out maternally, reflectively, on the round knob of one of her knees.

"Set down," she said, without passion.

Miss Swan seated herself on the edge of the rocker. She sat there motionless, leaning forward, with her dark eyes on her landlady's face. Mrs. Moss looked back at her.

"You couldn't get a nice furnished flat in such a quiet, respectable house for anything less," the landlady said.

"I thought that if you had something cheaper——"

"You're young. It ain't for me to ask questions or to give advice. But any girl of your age ought to know that she's got to have some respect for herself."

Miss Swan caught her breath, bit her lip. She started to say something, checked herself.

## 18 Those Who Walk in Darkness

"It's appearances I'm talking about," Mrs. Moss went on, steadily. "Have you got any folks?"

"No."

"You're lucky. Relations are a curse."

"I'm all alone."

"Many a girl's been held back by having a lot of brothers and cheap-skate friends trying to tell her how to live. You've got a nice little flat in a respectable house—and in a good neighbourhood, too. You're independent. I don't see what you're kicking about. You can hold your head up with the rest of them."

"But I thought that if I could get a little money ahead I might—might——"

"The way to get money ahead is to respect yourself," said Mrs. Moss sagely, "and make others respect you. The way to do that is to have a good front and a nice respectable place to bring your friends to."

"That's what I was thinking about. It doesn't look like a place that a working-girl would have."

"If I ever had any other sort of a tenant in those rooms I never knew about it. There's a sight of money to be made in New York, especially if you're quiet and respectable. I'm mighty careful about the reputation of my premises. One of those big, brazen dolls was asking about that flat of yours just before you came, and I wouldn't even look at her."

"I suppose that everything you say is true," Miss Swan conceded, with a look askance.

"And you don't want to forget," Mrs. Moss went on, without heat, "that spring's coming on. There is always more money to be made in the spring than at any other time. And it's pleasanter, too. It's mighty hard, I'll admit, to work when it's all snow and slush, or when it's freezing. Nobody likes that. But it's different in the

spring. Folks are more bent on getting a little enjoyment out of life. Winters they get sour on the weather and they ain't got any use for theirselves or any one else. . . . You say you've never been in New York in the spring?"

"This will be my first."

"Then you just stick on and don't get any crazy ideas about depriving yourself. You've got your future ahead of you, and you've got to think of that."

"I can't think of anything else," Miss Swan responded.

"The spring will learn you more than I can tell you," Mrs. Moss continued. It was as if she exuded a film of sentimental reminiscence. "It is queer the effect that spring has on folks. I'm going on seventy-five, but in some ways I'm just as young as I ever was. I ain't giving you any advice, you understand. Your business is your business. But if I *was* giving you advice, I'd tell you not to worry your head about taking a cheaper flat; not now, with the spring coming on."

"But I'm so afraid at times!"

It was a cry from the heart. Miss Swan twisted her slender hands together. Mrs. Moss merely looked at her blindly.

"You haven't got anything to be afraid of so far as I can see. Nobody's going to bother a girl who respects herself and lives in a good, respectable house."

This was intended to be final.

"It isn't when I'm here," said Miss Swan, with an accent of desperation. She was speaking to herself as much as she was speaking to the landlady. She was at a point where she simply had to express aloud some feeling that she had been attempting to smother. "It isn't when I'm here at all. It's when I'm out in the street, and alone, and at night. I know that you'll think I'm crazy."

## 20 Those Who Walk in Darkness

"No, I won't think that you're crazy. You're merely young. You'll get over it."

"But, somewhere—I can't remember where it was—I read or heard the phrase: 'The terror by night.' " Miss Swan let out the first two or three ripples of a haunted laugh. Her dark eyes flashed to the dull, drab window, hovered there meditatively for several seconds. "I don't know why the words should come back to me, but they do; and they make me want to run and hide."

"I've been looking at the wallpaper in your flat," said Mrs. Moss. "I don't think I ought to change it. You can't tell it from new. The lady who was in your rooms before you took them was very particular. She was a real swell, too. She's living on Riverside Drive now."

"I suppose that it doesn't matter," said Miss Swan from the door. She added more softly: "Nothing matters."

But that phrase she had repeated seemed to have conjured up a ghost. She had the appearance of a fugitive from the indefinable spirit she had named "The Terror by Night."

## Chapter III

### MYRRH AND FRANKINCENSE

ALEC BREEN was in even higher spirits on the following morning as he made his way toward the Grand Central Station to greet his friend from Chenango County.

All that night he had enjoyed himself thoroughly in his little booth back of the counter in the lunch-wagon. The coffee-percolator and the sausage-boiler had kept him company when no one else was there. But most of the time the wagon had been comfortably crowded. He had exchanged his repartee with the customers. He had listened to their worldly conversation. The nighthawk cabmen and chauffeurs, the policemen, the cheap actors, the rowdies and the derelicts, had come and gone. He had served them all with speed and dexterity. Not a few of them had given him tips.

He entered the big station with a vague, inspiring sentiment that the place belonged to him and he to it.

He didn't have very long to wait. Soon the gates were pushed back, and he was giving Rufus Underwood a noisy welcome. Together they passed out into the concourse. It was as high-arched, as vast and dim as a temple.

"Some town!" laughed Alec.

"It sure is," Rufus agreed, with a catching of his breath. "And you, Alec! By golly! You look like a regular New Yorker yourself."

He was taller than Alec. He was big. He had a magnificent pair of shoulders on him, and his sunburned neck was as round and straight as a young hickory-tree. He was just on the verge of manhood, twenty-one or so; but his pink cheeks and frank blue eyes gave him the appearance of an overgrown boy.

Alec began to brag.

"Wait till you see the place I live in," he said joyfully. "It's a real house, kid. It isn't any frame-house like the ones we lived in back in Chenango. It's a real apartment house, carpet on the stairs, gas burning in the hall all night. Live neighbourhood, too! It used to be the Tenderloin. They call it the Old Tenderloin yet. Police think that they've cleaned it up. Ha-ha!"

"Go on!" Rufus gasped.

He was looking about him dazedly as they passed out into the turmoil of Forty-second Street. The mighty chorus of trucks and street-cars, of motor-horns and compressed-air riveters rushed in upon them like a gale. The sky-scrapers reared up and back dizzily on their hind legs like frightened horses. Rufus, clutching his suit-case, swayed into Alec.

"That's the way I felt six months ago when I first got here," Alec patronised him. "Now nothing can feaze me. Come on. We'll walk it. The place where I live isn't so very far from here. You might as well begin right away to learn something about the town."

"The sky is the same," Rufus commented, with a touch of tender recognition. He had glimpsed the brilliant, sun-washed blue infinitely far up and ahead of them.

"Some bed, too, Rufe," Alec continued, describing the delectations of Mrs. Moss's furnished flats. "None of your corn-shuck ticks. It's a regular hotel-bed, with springs—real springs!—and a mattress. Say, bo, when

you roll into that, you feel just like Andrew Carnegie. Bath-room, too!"

"No!"

"Surest thing you know! Little old Alec's caught on, Rufe. You ought to hear the landlady talk about me. She's a friend of mine. I'll introduce you to her. Fine old lady! She says: 'Alec, you're all to the good! Five bones a week and all you want to eat!' It isn't so fierce, is it? Night-work, too, like all the wise ones have here in New York! Gives a fellow a chance to stay in bed all day if he feels like it. Pretty soft!"

They came at last to the street where Alec lived. There they paused. It was a street of laundries and restaurants, of boarding-houses and costumers' shops. There was a garage in it, noisy and odoriferous. There was a Cuban cigar factory. There were a good many ash-cans about. From all these things there came a symphony of exotic sounds and smells. It was as if the street were possessed of a special atmosphere which it gave off, and continued to give off, with the persistent generosity of a flower.

Alec gave a long, ecstatic sniff.

"Um—m—m! New York!" he whispered. "Can't you just smell it? I love that smell. There's none of your barn-yard about that; is there, Rufe?"

Rufus also sniffed. Into his unspoiled nostrils there came all the gamut of perfumes from chop-suey to gasoline.

"It does smell different," he confessed. He tried to organise his thought into words. "It's sort of rich. Anything might grow in air like that."

Even then there may have been in his heart some premonition of what his own harvest might become in this garden of romance and tragedy. He was a farmer born

and bred. Instinctively he knew Nature and her ways, suspected the queer freaks of beauty and ugliness, sweetness and venom of which she was capable with such a vast amount of human material to work upon. The tainted air thrilled him. It was as if he had imbibed some toxic drug.

There was no doubt about the premonition later in the day. It was another sort of perfume that had roused him into full consciousness of it.

Throughout the morning and most of the afternoon he and Alec had talked together in the little rear flat on the second floor. Alec had cooked their lunch there. Finally Alec had consigned himself to sleep. Sleep was impossible for Rufus. He started downstairs for the street. He had just reached the lower landing when the street-door opened and a girl came in.

He stopped where he was and watched her.

There were two rows of letter-boxes in the lobby. She paused at one of the boxes and peered into it. She took a key-ring from her small purse and opened the box. Her movements were as deft and graceful as a sylph's.

So Rufus thought. The mere spectacle of her held him spellbound.

He noted the large, dark eyes. They were almost Oriental. The nose was small and slightly aquiline. There was a round, white chin. Rufus breathed a hasty sigh. The chin was upturned. He saw the perfect throat, the smooth, clean swell at the opening of her filmy waist. She was exquisitely dressed, he thought. She wore a modish toque. Her thin jacket and trim skirt were moulded perfectly to every shifting line of her small, lithe figure.

He took a step forward and stopped again.

The girl had clicked her letter-box shut, had stepped

into the hall. She hadn't seen him standing motionless there. She had stopped at the first door on the left, had used another key. She was gone.

So swift and overwhelming had been his other emotions up to this point that it was not until then that Rufus was conscious of the perfume that she had left behind her. It was a perfume he couldn't analyse. There was something suggestive of violets in it. Again it was reminiscent of syringias.

But it wasn't its floral quality at all that had bitten into his interest so, and he knew it. That perfume had been as clean and fresh and as individual as the girl herself. It made him feel almost as if he had touched her.

He stood there contemplating this fact long enough for an extra breath, and as he did so his heart began to pound.

Almost gropingly he made his way out into the lobby and looked at the name above the letter-box which the girl had opened. His eyes and his heart both seized upon it.

"‘Viola Swan,’" he read. "Oh, what a beautiful name!"

## Chapter IV

### THE SONG OF SONGS

**H**E had intended to go out for a walk. Around him lay all New York with its million lures and mysteries, the city he had dreamed about and which, until this day, he had never seen. But now he was bound to the house by a heavy and unbreakable chain. He got as far as the sidewalk. He felt himself drawn back into the house.

He went half-way up the stairs, and stood there as long as he dared, looking at the door through which the girl had passed. In his imagination he drew her portrait, line by line, as he had seen her. He tinted it, perfumed it. He murmured her name, hoping that it would act as a spell to make her appear again.

At last he re-entered the flat upstairs where Alec slept.

"Who's the girl who lives on the ground floor?" he asked, as Alec yawned and stretched himself awake.

"Haven't any idea," Alec answered. "Why?"

"She's a wonder."

"New York's full of wonders," Alec declared. "To-night I'm going to take you down to the wagon with me, kid. I'll show you the sort of a guy I am when it comes to serving ten customers at once."

"She uses some sort of perfume that makes you think of white clover, or of locust-trees, or wild grape in bloom."

"You can take your dinner with me every night down there," Alec went on. "You know! I'm not going to knock down on the boss; you'll pay for it; only, I can work a lot of extra chow into you that the other folks don't get."

"Her name is Viola," Rufus put in softly, "—Viola Swan. What do you suppose she does for a living?"

"Who?"

"The young lady down-stairs."

It was as if Alec for the first time had become aware of what Rufus was talking about. He attempted to focus his thought on this subject foreign to his own interest. The conclusion of his mental effort brought him to the verge of a little laugh.

"I don't know," he said; "but this is the Old Tenderloin, Rufe. The police may think that they've got the lid clamped down, but there's a lot of funny stuff going on. It's all on the quiet. Only, New York ain't Chenango County—not by a dog-gone sight!—and never will be. I never spotted the girl you speak about. Does she look like she was straight?"

Into Rufus Underwood's boyish blue eyes there came a dark blue glow—a sort of ultra-violet ray which matched the pinker glow of his cheeks.

"The girl I'm speaking about ain't the kind you mean, Alec."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've seen her, looked at her."

Alec let out the imminent laugh.

"Gosh, Rufe," he exclaimed, tickled, "you're a farmer all right. Wait till you've been here as long as I have." He snickered. "Some of 'em could pass for church-members back where we come from, but you can't swear to any of 'em here in this old town."

## 28 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Rufus contemplated this statement for a while as Alec dressed himself.

"I could swear to *her*, Alec," he said earnestly. "I'm not much of a New Yorker yet, but, shucks!—you don't have to be a New Yorker for that."

"My hours are from six to four," Alec returned, adjusting his brilliantly striped cravat in front of his mirror. "We'll take a little stroll along Broadway—drop into a movie-show or something. You can come down to the wagon with me and put on the nose-bag, then come back here and turn in."

It was almost midnight when Rufus returned to the Street of Strange Smells which had become his abiding place. The darkness had merely served to increase its mystery. It seemed strange to Rufus that there could be a place like this under the same stars with which he had become friendly amid scenes so different. The stars had often been his companions. They had shone for him on frosty mornings when he had got up early to do his chores. Often he had watched them emerge in the magic afterglow when he was driving the cows home from pasture. But oftenest he had watched them as he lay abed at night—when the bulging quilts and pillows became as ghostly mountains to his drowsing sight and each star became a personal thing. And there were the same stars looking down on this fortress of poverty and squalor, of luxury and sin, of banks and churches, to which he had come from Chenango County.

It all made him feel a trifle exalted, a wee bit homesick.

Now and then a stray cat slunk obliquely across the street, but, in the rôle of night-prowlers, the cats were almost as much out of place as the stars were, overhead.

There were still many people about, even in this side street. Most of the shops and all of the restaurants were still lighted. Only here and there had the night got a foothold, in splotched darkness. But people and houses had taken on a different aspect—for Rufus, they had. There was a hint of peril and viciousness about them. They were as foreigners. For that matter, so was he a foreigner to himself—walking through the streets at this hour.

He came to the entrance of the house which had become his home. He paused there. He cast a final glance over this disquieting new world of his.

Just then he caught a glimpse of a lithe and quick-stepping figure drawing near. It was the same girl he had seen that afternoon—Viola Swan. It smote him to the heart that she had been out at this time of the night, alone and unprotected. She was probably unaware of the danger. It touched him with something like rage that her folks, whoever they might be, should have permitted it.

These were just swift perceptions, like flaming darts. The major fact was that she drew near, that in a second or two they would be face to face.

Rufus felt dizzy. He could neither disappear into the house nor pass up the street, although he would gladly have done either, for he was overcome by bashfulness.

She continued to approach—in a whirl, so it seemed to him; and yet he was acutely, almost supernaturally, perceptive of everything about her. He knew it when her dark eyes discovered him. He took note of her slight pause. It was just an instant of quivering poise, of suspended decision. She was wearing a pink silk sweater now, and her hands were in the pockets of it. There was a tremulous rise of chin and breast, a slight

## 30 Those Who Walk in Darkness

tensing of her whole slender shape—the subtle movement of one who finally decides.

She smiled at him.

To Rufus it seemed that that smile lasted the length of time it would have taken a star to rise and set. Time, space and he himself were planetary just then. He was looking down from planetary silence and solitude.

And yet all this could have lasted but the barest fraction of time.

He saw Viola Swan still smiling. She appeared to be on the point of speech. He was engulfed in her atmosphere, and it was as tepid and fragrant and stirring as that of a haunted garden.

If Rufus Underwood was contemplating such a vision as had never before delighted and thrilled him, there was evidence that such was the case for Viola Swan as well. He didn't look like any man she had ever seen before—not any that she had encountered thus far in New York, at any rate. She must have wondered at that look in his eyes. It was a look compounded of reverence and fear. Yet he was young, big, beautiful.

Her smile went out. Into her own face came a reflection of the look in his.

It was out of a species of mental swoon that Rufus emerged into chill misgiving. What if she should think that he was trying to take advantage of the fact that it was late at night and that she was unprotected?

This increased the solemnity of his look. Likewise it stirred him to action.

After that first infinitesimal pause the girl had stared forward again as if reassured. Rufus backed away and pushed the door open for her. He did it in a trance. As in a trance he was aware of a disconcerting touch as soft as thistledown. It was her sweater that had touched

him, but it had conveyed to the uttermost tips of his nerves a voluptuous wave of tenderness and warmth.

He knew that she had glanced up at him again in passing. She had thanked him mutely with her eyes.

Rufus stood there forgetful of the world for a long time afterward. Never before in his life, so far as he could remember, had he ever looked into a girl's eyes and been dazed like that. He kept asking himself why this was.

They were very wonderful eyes, and yet this could not have been the reason why they had affected him so. He had sense enough to know that. At least, this was what he told himself. No, it must have been that he had received some message from them which, as yet, he was unable to understand. New York was a strange place. It was filled with awful mysteries. He felt, somehow, as if he were blind, unable to see things as they were. It smote him with sympathy to think that possibly Viola Swan also was groping in darkness.

He recalled many things.

Her smile had disappeared, suddenly and without apparent cause. Possibly she had mistaken him at first for a friend. Still, this was hardly an explanation for her subsequent expression of thankfulness and relief. He wasn't sure, but he believed that he had touched his hat. And, for awhile, he cursed himself for not having removed his hat altogether as a real gentleman would have done.

But on further reflection he was just as well satisfied that he had not done so. Very easily he might have shown himself too polite, too gallant. He would have been ready to die of mortification had he given her the slightest reason to suspect that he had tried to flirt with her.

## 32 Those Who Walk in Darkness

He wondered about her, tumultuously, as he climbed the stairs to the second floor where Alec had his flat; and afterward, while he was getting ready for bed.

She was an aristocrat. Aristocratic girls had occasionally appeared in Chenango County in the summer, and Viola Swan had the same look about her. Only, Miss Swan was more beautiful. It was a strange and alluring fact—it was an obsession—that he should be living here in the same house with her—“under the same roof.”

She doubtless lived with her old mother. Her mother was ill. Viola had been forced to go out to the drug-store. That was how she happened to have been out so late all alone.

Rufus felt sorry for her. It increased his craving to aid and protect her in some way. He lay there battling in the midst of dreams and visions.

Around him New York was doing the same, but the stars were undisturbed. And Rufus yearned for stellar majesty.

Finally his world was hushed. The walls dissolved. He dreamed of Viola Swan.

## Chapter V

### THE PIPES OF PAN

**A**MONG the earliest discoveries that Rufus Underwood made after his advent in New York was that not every one could find employment as quickly as Alexander Breen had done. It made Rufus feel distinctly inferior to his friend, made him more and more willing to accept his views on life and conduct generally.

"Bo," Alec advised good naturedly, "you want to cut out all sentimental stuff. It's bunk. Get wise. Get busy."

But this was all the more difficult, so far as Rufus was concerned, in that spring was coming on apace. It set him to hankering for everything that was fine and beautiful. It would have made him homesick for the banks of the Unadilla; only, all that he loved back there was personified in Viola Swan. So was the season. Of spring she was the spirit and incarnation.

And spring was netting New York in its silken spell as certainly as it was the hills and valleys of distant Chenango.

The tides of humanity still ran muddy and cold in the gloomy streets; but far above the reefs of steel and granite the sky glistened as pure and tender as at the very dawn of Creation. Not only that, but beyond the end of the street and across the Hudson—like a picture darkly framed—Rufus could see the slopes of the

## 34 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Palisades change from drab to green. And every now and then, there would come from that direction a gust of air so fresh and fervid that it was like a breath exhaled by Nature herself.

It was on the evening of such a day that he again met Viola Swan at the door.

This time it was in the lower hall as both of them were going out. Miss Swan, apparently, had just come from paying a visit to Mrs. Moss.

Rufus cast a quick glance back in that direction. In the dim and floating light he spied the fishy face of the old landlady peering through the panel of her door. It was only for an instant that he saw her. There seemed to be something of eager expectancy on Mrs. Moss's face. Then Rufus was confronting Miss Swan.

She was hesitant. She was dressed all in white. A simple little straw hat was pressed down on her dark hair. She cast a look up at him. It was friendly, almost apologetic; but, this time, there was no smile in it.

Rufus had reflected too much on that previous encounter to make any mistake on this occasion. He acted automatically, as one would who has rehearsed a course of action often in his brain. He pulled his hat from his head. He opened the door for her. He let her pass. For a moment or two she drifted there before his eyes like something unearthly. She transmuted the rest of the world for him into a golden mist. Then, all of a sudden, she was very real, human, something of weight and physical substance.

He saw the delicate short hair that curled up from the back of her neck. Her skin, where the light touched it, was as if flecked with tiny particles of gold. His eyes swept all over her.

She seemed to be conscious of this. She half turned.

But instead of looking at him she glanced down at a point slightly to one side and in front of him. An added touch of carmine appeared under the down of her cheek, then slowly went away again. She breathed two words: "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Rufus blurted. "I was glad I had the chance."

"Why?"

"I—I don't know," Rufus confessed.

Miss Swan dared look at him, swiftly. There was a brief interval, then she looked again. Once more she had something in her face as of having seen the unexpected, the marvellous.

"Good-bye," she murmured.

But she hovered there, evidently willing to talk a while should there be anything to say.

Rufus had an inspiration. "How's your mother this evening?" he exploded.

Miss Swan was rather wonderstruck. "I haven't any mother," she returned in a small voice. "What made you think I had?"

"I thought maybe you were living with her," Rufus replied, with growing confusion. "The other night when I saw you coming in so late I thought that you had been to the doctor's, or the drug-store, or something, on her account. I was sorry you had to go out alone. I wished that I could have run your errand for you."

Miss Swan's dark eyes hadn't left his face. Once more that touch of carmine mounted from the lower curve of her cheek. He was in deadly fear there for a moment that she was going to laugh at him. When he became aware that there was no danger of this he let himself go in a riot of thankfulness and adoration. It was the girl's turn to be confused.

## 36 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Again she said "Good-bye," tremulously. She added that she thought that she had better be going.

"Good-bye," said Rufus.

There was a Messiah chorus in his heart. It quickened his breathing. It chanted and soared long, long after he was alone. All the ordinary noises and scents of the street were annihilated.

"I spoke to her," he said; "and she spoke to me."

Old Mrs. Moss had advanced stealthily to the front of the house from her pool of shadows.

"It's a great evening," Rufus remarked.

"While you're young you ought to enjoy yourself," she emitted slyly, with a sidewise, upward glance at him. She had no look nor breath for the deepening night. With a quick movement she stooped and seized an advertising bill that had been thrown into the entry. She scurried away with this like a wily old fish making off with a piece of stolen bait.

Neither Mrs. Moss nor Alec Breen saw any sign or portent in the advancing season. For Mrs. Moss there were more days when she could tell Jo, the half-witted cellar-man, to let the furnace go cold. There were nights when Alec pushed open the little window at the back of the wagon to let out some of the heat from the sausage-boiler and the percolator.

But Rufus Underwood was more sensitive to the weather than he had ever been in his life before.

It was more than physical. His brain as well as his body was pervaded by a growing heat. There was an incessant restlessness in the profoundest depths of his nature. Old dreams and unidentified longings steamed up and befogged his thought like the vapours of lost rivers clouding a landscape. He had a perpetual feeling

that he was on the verge of some great discovery; but whether this discovery would turn out to be an abyss to swallow him up, or a bridge to heaven, he didn't know. He was unsettled. Only the heat was constant, steadily increasing.

So with the weather.

Then, suddenly, there came that snarling outbreak in which the weather expressed its own latent anguish. A tempest of sleet swirled over the city. Grey clouds bore down until the northeast wind rushed between them and the sodden streets like half-frozen waters through a sewer.

Rufus sought Alec in the wagon.

"This will be bad for the peach-crop," said Rufus with a shiver, as he shook the sleet from his shoulders. "The warm spell has brought out the bloom, started everything to going. Now, along comes this wind and hail."

His eyes were sombre. There was more than the usual flush in his cheeks. Alec glanced in his direction, but saw nothing amiss with either Rufus or the weather.

"The old wagon's more homelike when it's dirty outside," he said with a snicker. "Customers stay longer, eat more."

Rufus sipped some coffee. He had no appetite. For the time being he and Alec were alone. Alec hummed a tune as he polished up the heavy plates and saucers.

"Bad night for the ladies up in our part of the town," he remarked presently. "How about that little chicken who lives on the ground floor? Seen her lately?"

"I—I don't know who you mean," said Rufus.

The wind howled outside. There was a similar tempest in his heart. His thought was only mildly diverted by the arrival of another customer. This was a sort

## 38 Those Who Walk in Darkness

of star boarder, an elderly gentleman with a lachrymose eye and a perpetual look of disdain.

"Hello, Doc," Alec greeted him. "How's tricks?"

"Rotten," said Doc.

Rufus had pushed back his coffee-cup. Alec took it.

"What's the matter with you, kid?" cried Alec.  
"You've only drunk half of it."

"I'm feeling sort of sick," said Rufus. He shivered.

"Tell him to take a drink of whisky," Doc recommended.

Alec laughed. "Doc ought to know," he said crisply. "Doc's chief puller-in at a wax-works over on Fourteenth Street." Then, more seriously: "Go on, Rufe; a little whisky and a night in the hay will make you feel fine. Sinkers with your coffee, Doc?"

Rufus went out into the swift, cold currents of the night. His mind groped for the effigy of Viola Swan as he would have looked for a landmark in swimming a strange river in the dark. He felt that he needed her. He felt almost as if she were his hope of life. The mystery and the wonder of her baffled him. The winds of despair and rage, of desire and devotion, swept through the unlighted caves of his soul almost like these other winds which were twisting and roaring through the night.

He stopped at the door of his house. He looked at the place where she had stood. He saluted her silently by name.

He would have knocked at her door had he dared. But the mere idea of what might happen in such a case drove him heart-heavy on his way up the familiar steps. She would wonder why he came. She wouldn't have guessed, any more than Alec did, what ailed him. And

he would rather die, anyway, than ever let her know about the unspeakable hankering in his heart.

They were to sleep under the same roof. That much was vouchsafed him. It consoled him always with a secret delight.

But to-night this thought had just the opposite from its usual effect. It consoled him, all right; but it didn't quiet him. The tempest outside and the tempest within were becoming as one. Here in his heart also was an early bloom that would blacken and die unless the storm underwent a beneficent change.

He stood there with his breast heaving. A rowdy blast bore in upon him from the bath-room. He went in there to close the window. As he reached up to pull down the sash, he saw a sudden flare of light across the narrow court on the floor below.

He saw the shadow of a familiar figure. He knew, only then, that he was looking down into the apartment of Viola Swan.

## Chapter VI

### GHOSTS AND VISIONS

**H**E was spellbound. He couldn't move. The thing was a revelation to him. It was like an answer to his unspoken prayers—prayers that he would not have dared to formulate in the secrecy of his heart. He admitted them now. His blood ran hot. He was buffeted by joy and guilt.

He had been standing there for only a few seconds when he saw her more clearly yet. She was so distinct and near that it was almost as if they were in the same room. Her window also was open. There was nothing but a thin lace curtain between them, and this fluttered in the breeze with maddening veilings and unveilings.

Evidently she had just entered from the street. She was wearing her hat and her silk sweater. She had a little movement of weariness. She opened the door of a closet that seemed to be overflowing with feminine things. Rufus was sure that there billowed up to him a wave of delicate perfume such as he had noticed the first day that he had ever seen her.

She had disappeared for a moment. When she again absorbed his sight, the hat and the sweater were gone. And her cloudy hair and her sheer, open-throated little waist gave her a note of feminine intimacy that he never could have imagined.

The spell that had fallen upon him had become paral-

ysis, so far as his will was concerned. But his arteries throbbed, his mouth was open, his breath came short.

There was a bureau with a mirror on it near the window. Beyond this there was a piece of furniture somewhat like a chest of drawers which Rufus had scarcely noticed—which certainly he had not identified. Miss Swan approached this thing, made a few occult passes, then pulled a section of it out and down. Rufus saw that it was a couch.

She seated herself on the edge of it. She took a small book from the bureau and glanced through it. While her eyes and her hands were still thus occupied she scraped her low shoes from her feet with a movement that was so definitely childlike that Rufus was submerged in a flow of sympathy that was almost parental.

This didn't last long, though. Again he was buffeted by the storm.

She dropped the book into her lap. With a gesture so swift that he could scarcely follow it she had lifted her arms. Her hands fluttered over her head like a pair of white butterflies busy with a flower. Her hair floated down. She shook it out with a toss of her head. Strands of it caught the light and formed a nimbus until she might have been a saint. Then her hands went to her hip with that same swift grace.

There must have been a moment of hiatus, when Rufus's senses, overcome, failed to record.

When he next saw her she was emerging from a foam of whiteness. She was as scantily clad as a shell by the froth of the sea. The sheen and the substance of her were as resistant and smooth to his sight as they would have been to his sense of touch. Certainly he could feel her warmth. He was swept from head to foot with tingling electricity. He was like a morphine

## 42 Those Who Walk in Darkness

eater. He could no longer tell where sensation ended and illusion began.

He made a desperate effort to call back complete control over himself, for he was well aware that this was one of the supreme moments of his life, and the thought of losing even an instant of perfect perception was torture.

For a while she stood upright and rounded, her single web of a garment fluttering and clinging about her, while she brushed her hair in front of the looking-glass.

Her shoulders, her arms and her breast were bare. They looked marvellously lithe and smooth. Save for their rippling change and flow they were like ivory—but ivory with a suggestion of pink and blue in the shadows of it; warm, resilient.

The lace curtain was dancing like a pagan ghost at a shrine to Venus, and there was a similar dance in Rufus's chest.

She tired of brushing her hair. She sat down on the edge of the bed. Her hair was not very long, but it was exceedingly abundant. She had brushed it just enough to set it fluffing out in crinkly, sparkling strands. The amount of it increased her appearance of slenderness. She didn't look the woman so much as she looked the magic child—a sort of fairy princess out of a fable. And all this was a fairy tale for Rufus come true.

The miserable little courtyard had become the garden of a king. The soiled brick wall became the rampart of an enchanted palace. The dank and unfriendly air was slumbrous with aromatic warmth.

What amazed him most, in a moment of dreamlike contemplation, was that the frontier between the known and the unknown had shown itself to be so fragile. It wasn't merely that his immediate surroundings were

changed. The whole world was transfigured. And this had been accomplished by a touch, the unlinking of a hook, the slipping away of a little cotton and silk.

He stared and stared with suffocating awe.

She picked up her little book again. She threw herself back on her couch in an attitude of unspeakable grace. There was no artifice about her. Each line and movement bespoke a perfect abandonment. She had the book above her. She read. Each time she moved, the lights and shadows concealed and disclosed new adorations to him. He became translated. He became as one drunk with power and riches.

He had been given life, and he had been given this to see!

He was struggling to express himself in song. The refrain of it was: "Mine! Mine!" It was devotional, and yet it was savage. It was savage, and yet it was tender. She was no longer a divinity to him. She was a girl. She was to him what Eve was to Adam—palpitant, ponderable, human. And yet, for all that, there he was saying his prayers to her as an untutored savage would have made his prayers to an apparition.

An age it seemed since he had either moved or breathed. Only his hot spirit was active. That was all there was of him that remained alive. In it and of it he drew nearer and nearer to the figure on the couch. He enveloped her. They merged. They breathed the same celestial atmosphere, had the same thoughts, experienced the same tremors and aspirations. They swooned and circled through space. They cruised an infinity of pink and sable clouds together and they were swept along on a gale of cosmic harmony, up and up, to the gates of the Seventh Heaven.

## 44 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Suddenly there was a flash of lightning, a thunder-clap.

It came like the Crack of Doom.

But Rufus clung to his window as there rushed in upon him a wolfish pack of hail and rain.

His thoughts still were only of her. She had risen, startled. She hesitated there for a moment, her little garment flicking about her and her loose hair flung about her bare shoulders. She sprang toward the window. She raised her startled eyes.

Like that she stood at her window for a second or two staring straight up at that other window where Rufus stood. He was still petrified.

She showed no great embarrassment nor yet was there any boldness in her bearing. She pushed the upper portion of the window shut. She drew the shade.

As Rufus came to himself, he felt that he had not only been petrified but also stricken blind.

The thunder was in his ears, the lightning in his eyes. In his breast there was a raging torment of both ice and fire. He stumbled a little. He had difficulty in finding the door back into the bedroom. He plunged around like a drunken man. He flung himself face downward on his bed. He kept mumbling to himself: "Oh, what have I done? Oh, what have I seen?" He felt as if he should like to sob, but he couldn't have told whether this was for joy or grief. But, whichever it was, he was in agony.

This agony was becoming harsh and definite. He shook and he burned, and this was characteristic of his mind as well.

At first he tried to analyse his feelings and explain them. He was all for blaming it on conscience in the

beginning; and he persisted in this even while another line of thought gradually asserted itself, beginning with a whisper and ending with a shout.

Miss Swan had stood there at the window undressed. She had seen him. She had remained unabashed. She had given no sign of having recognised him. He was grateful for this to a certain extent. But it haunted him all the more to think that she might have stood like that before some other man. The more he struggled against the coils of doubt and misery that encircled him the tighter and mightier they became.

He pronounced her name.

This seemed to bring him a certain measure of relief. It encouraged him to try again.

“Viola! Oh, Viola!”

Each time he uttered the cry he received a stab in his lungs. But he wouldn’t let this stop him.

And presently he was sure that she had answered his call; only, he wasn’t just sure where this had taken place—here in his room, or down there in hers; or in neither of these places, but away over in Chenango County instead, along the flooded banks of the Unadilla.

## Chapter VII

### THE SPIRIT HE CALLED

RUFUS lay there all night rocked in a delirium that was like an earthquake. He was more or less conscious all the time that he had a pain in his chest.

But this wasn't what mattered. The pain was almost welcome. It was a form of redemption. What counted was that he was battered between heaven and earth and that he couldn't regain either of them and that in one of these places was the only other soul in the universe necessary to his salvation.

That's the form that his delirium took. It was as vasty, nebulous and grand as the original Fall of Man.

There were pictures of that in the old family Bible. He had studied these when he was still too little to read. They returned to him now, augmented, infused with terrific force, sinister, huge, populous with devils.

It seemed to him that in a period immeasurably remote he had been a denizen of the earth and had there encountered a girl named Viola Swan. Then, all of a sudden, he had discovered her in Paradise. He had stormed the doors, committed a desecration. The earthquake had followed. It was the Wrath of God. This was his punishment.

“Viola! Viola!”

She was the only one with the influence and the right to help him.

His delirium was at its height when Alec Breen came home.

Alec studied him with fraternal interest, tried to question him. At first Alec was persuaded that Rufus had been drinking. Then he decided that Rufus had eaten something that hadn't agreed with him. Alec had eyes that saw not, but he heard something familiar.

"What do you mean by 'Viola'?" Alec asked.

Rufus merely mumbled something that Alec couldn't understand. Alec went away. When he came back he had a half-pint flask of whisky. He had a secret belief in the wisdom of the customer he called "Doc." He poured some whisky into Rufus's rebellious throat. Then Alec undressed Rufus, while Rufus groaned, and put him to bed.

Alec slept.

Once more Rufus took up his battle between heaven and earth. Most of the time, now, he was seeing again Viola Swan as he had seen her in her room, only she was charioted in a cloud instead of a folding-bed. He put out his arms to her. He would have called her, but he had no voice.

There was a real doctor who lived next door. He was a youngish man not overly tidy, but he had a beard and he was subdued and wise. Alec, having slept, had gone to seek him. Rufus was no better.

"Darned if I can see what's the matter with him," said Alec, explaining the case to the doctor. "He looked healthy as a horse when he came here from the country. I come home and find him out of his head and calling for something or some one with a name like 'Viola.' "

"Umph," said the physician. "Is he stuck on any girl that you know of?"

"Not that I ever noticed," Alec replied.

"It's a touch of pneumonia," said the medical man, after he had examined Rufus. "I guess there's no danger. Give him this every hour. My visits are generally two dollars. Thanks!"

To Viola Swan, with her apprehensive eyes, Alec Breen looked greatly changed. He had been for passing her without notice, as he generally did, and this had given her a chance to study him. He no longer looked so dapper. He had the tired and preoccupied expression of one confronted by something he couldn't understand, a situation that was opaque.

Miss Swan caught her breath. She spoke to him.

"Mr. Breen!"

Alec stopped short and looked at her, but no one could have told from his appearance that he had actually seen her.

"What has become of that friend of yours?"

"He's sick—been sick for a week."

Miss Swan gave a start.

"He—he looked so healthy—when I saw him."

"Pneumonia," said Alec. And he added, with a note of desperation: "I've been doing everything I can for him, but I'll be darned if he seems to be getting any better. He's fretting all the time. I can't see what's got into him."

"Where are his people?"

"He's only got a grandmother and an uncle or two. They live up the State. He comes from the country. That's where he ought to be. But he says he doesn't want to go even if he could."

"I came from the country, too," said Miss Swan softly.

"It's sort of got my goat. I give him all the attention I can, but he's fretting all the time."

"Do you suppose—I could do anything?"

"Say! *Would* you?"

"Yes."

"Would you just go up and look in on him?—sit around with him for a minute or two?"

"If you think he'd like it."

"Listen! I've got this straight. I've heard him calling for some girl or other. I don't know who she is. It sounds like her name was Viola—"

"Viola!"

"Anyway, what a guy wants when he's sick like that is to have some woman around him. You know how it is. I haven't got the nerve to ask Mrs. Moss to go up there. She's got troubles of her own."

Alec hadn't seen the singular glow that had appeared in the depths of Viola Swan's eyes when she heard her own name pronounced. It was a glow that lingered there even after Miss Swan, having looked away, once more looked up into his face furtively, feelingly.

"I'll gladly go up," she said softly.

"You're all to the good," said Alec. "Here, take my key. You can leave it in the door. I've got to beat it."

He looked at her, but there was nothing in his eyes to show that he saw the odd and moving expression that had remained in the girl's face. She took the key. He hurried away. She stood there alone.

The weather had gone mild again. The night was settling down, and even in this part of New York the dusk had about it the mystery and charm of spring.

Miss Swan looked out into the street. She looked back through the hall. She saw dimly, in her imagination, the youth who had twice opened the door for her, looked into her face with the unmistakable expression of reverence and awe. It was a look that had penetrated

## 50 Those Who Walk in Darkness

the depths of her heart and remained there, disquieting, unforgettable.

Who was this Viola he had called?

Had any one been there to see, and had Mrs. Moss been less economical of light, there would have been evidence, possibly, that the girl who called herself Viola Swan let herself go, just for a second or two, in a paroxysm of bitterness and remorse.

What right had *she* to go up into the presence of this youth who had looked at her as no other man had ever done?—and him lying helpless.

Miss Swan started in the direction of the stairs. There was no special occasion for it—her conscience was clear; but she wouldn't have had Mrs. Moss see her for anything in the world. Mrs. Moss did, however, stare out for a while through the glass panel of her door. It was a blind stare, though, bereft of particular interest, not very human.

Shiveringly, Miss Swan had gained the stairs. Up through the shadows she went. She counted the steps. She noted the darkness.

But a deeper darkness—so her heart told her—lay beyond that door for which she had been given the key.

Down in his lunch-wagon, that night, Alec was working with his old-time vim. Every now and then while frying eggs, or slapping the mustard into the frankfurter-sandwiches, or even while indulging in persiflage with his customers, his thought kept reverting to the interview he had had with the girl in the lower hall of the house where he lived. He snickered. He expressed himself in aphorisms.

“You can never tell what a chicken’s got in her head.”

“It takes a wise guy to put one over on them.”

Altogether Alec was pretty well satisfied with himself. He wasn't quite clear about it; but he was sure that, in some way or other, he had "put one over" on the girl in the lower hall.

Likewise Mrs. Moss reflected now and then, lazily, on the fact that her tenant of the ground-floor-front had gone up to call on Alec Breen's friend. She had seen Miss Swan make the stairs. Later she had heard Miss Swan's footsteps in the flat overhead.

It was a minor mystery, not very pleasant. Mrs. Moss was pretty sure that Rufus had no money. She wondered what Miss Swan meant by wasting her time.

But Rufus Underwood, tossing in his bed, gripping ineffectually betimes at the pain in his chest, heard the door of the flat softly open, then close again. His delirium had become fugitive, intermittent, scarcely to be distinguished from the confused dreams of his troubled sleep. He peered through the streaked darkness.

He knew, as no one else ever could, how he had called to that certain spirit who meant more than life to him. And at last the spirit had answered.

She was there. He felt a tremor of incredulous wonder. He dared not move for fear the spell would be broken.

He breathed her name: "Viola!"

## Chapter VIII

### AN ANGEL OUT OF DARKNESS

IT continued to be a part of his delirium for Rufus—this seeming materialisation of Viola Swan who had come to wait on him—even after he had reconquered his courage sufficiently to take stock of the familiar facts of his environment and their relation to this vision who could not possibly be real.

The gas burned low. He had seen Alec light it and turn it down before he went away. The tiny flame flickered as ever in the draught that entered, at times, from the air-shaft. There were the dancing shadows on the ceiling and the wall. There was the foot of the bed. But it was at the foot of the bed and just under the gas-jet that the apparition stood. Surely it could be none else than Viola Swan herself.

He saw her changing expression.

She had looked at him at first with an expression of poignant regret. This had turned to overflowing sympathy. This had turned to fear and challenge. Then it was such a look of sheer love that Rufus could no longer maintain silence. Whatever he started to say it was inarticulate. But in response to it he heard her voice.

She said: "I'm so sorry that you are ill!"

Rufus managed to speak: "It's you—you!"

She smiled. So did he—or he thought he did—although there was such a sob in his chest that it hurt him.

"I hope that you are feeling better," said Miss Swan.

"I thought—that you were—nothing but a vision," said Rufus.

"Would you like me to sponge off your face?" Miss Swan asked, after a period of hesitancy.

Once more Rufus failed to say the things he wanted to say. Miss Swan took his inarticulate gasp for the affirmative that it was. She sought about the room, with his eyes upon her. Presently she was back with a cool cloth. Rufus shut his eyes. On his forehead there descended a benediction like that of a shower on a thirsty field.

Miss Swan worked furtively. It was almost as if she were a criminal. One might have thought that she was an intruder here bent on accomplishing the work in hand before the proprietor of the premises returned. She kept casting those shadowy, awe-touched eyes of hers off into the dark corners, over against the dim and viewless window. But ever and again her eyes came back to the sick boy, and then they were startled in another way—mystified, wistful, almost maternal.

She remarked again his youth, his beauty, and yet his apparent helplessness. He had the throat and the torso of a Greek statue, and almost as white as marble was his skin—stainless, firm, perfectly modelled. Altogether he was such a youth as any woman might yearn over.

Miss Swan straightened up. Only her head was bowed. She stood there like that for an interval while her own breast slowly rose and fell.

Suddenly she gave a startled look about her. She had been forgetful of time. She attempted to turn the gas lower yet. Rufus was seemingly asleep. The light went out altogether.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, ever so softly.

## 54 Those Who Walk in Darkness

The elevated trains and the street-cars thundered in the middle-distance. From still further away came the melancholy hoots and moans of the harbour. Near by a man and a woman quarrelled.

Presently Rufus opened his eyes and looked. The room was almost completely dark. He suffered a pang of disappointment that made him cry out. It started the pain again in his lungs.

"Where are you? Don't leave me."

"I'm here."

"Light the gas so that I can see you," he panted.

"Don't you think it would be better if we remained like this? You seem to be better. I'll stay here until you go to sleep again."

"Light the gas," he pleaded.

There was a long delay. Once more he was in a state of tremulous doubt. Then a match flared, the room went light. Miss Swan was standing there looking at him with a queer expression of expectancy.

"It is really you," he laboured. "I—I was afraid again."

"I'll not let anything hurt you," she humoured him.

"I called you Viola. I—I had no right to."

"It was the other Viola you called."

"You are the only one."

On Miss Swan's face there gleamed a look that might have been one of amusement had it not been for its suggestion of pain. They continued to look at each other for a minute, possibly. Miss Swan had begun to smile, but the expression in her eyes had not changed to any great extent.

"Why should you have called me?" she asked, baffled.

Rufus would gladly have answered the question forthwith, honestly, but once more he found it hard to get

his thoughts into words. It was thought of his recent suffering that dominated him, and of his present relief, and of his dawning hopes of happiness. All this translated itself into pure emotion. His breast began to heave. He closed his eyes in an effort to keep back his tears.

"I didn't intend to call you," he said. "It was because you were in my mind. It was because I was sick."

"Why was I in your mind?" Miss Swan whispered.

"Because you were so good. Because you were so beautiful."

It was a confession of faith. Rufus was speaking a good deal as if he were six years old.

Miss Swan had listened to him. She seemed to listen to the echo of his words for a considerable period after he had finished speaking. Her eyes had been upon him. She gave another one of those startled glances of hers off into the shadows.

"Would you really like me to stay a little longer?" she asked; and she hung upon the answer as if the import of it were life or death.

"I don't want you to leave me at all," said Rufus, with a sick boy's perfect selfishness.

Miss Swan accepted the answer thoughtfully, somewhat as a captain of industry might accept some costly but honorific appointment. She was weighing the consequences. She was listening to the silent voices of her heart. She surveyed Rufus. She surveyed the room. It was as if there were an unanswerable plea in both of them.

"I'll clean things up a little," she decided.

"They're clean," Rufus responded.

"Then it won't take long," Miss Swan came back, with an intake of her breath.

She filled the room with a hum of quiet activity that

## 56 Those Who Walk in Darkness

was as soothing to Rufus as a lullaby. He lay there in a doze. He heard her sweep. He heard a rushing and splashing of waters that recalled the pump on the farm. Then, suddenly, she was there at his side. He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

"And now," she said, "I'm going to fix your bed."

He didn't answer except with his eyes. He had surrendered to her, utterly. She lifted his head and took the pillow away. Then the truth scurried in upon him that she was actually changing the sheets. Somewhere she had discovered fresh linen, just as she had already discovered the means of setting the flat to rights.

"Move over—further," said Miss Swan.

Rufus was obedient. His body felt as if it were a ton of material but slightly co-ordinated. He managed to shift it, however, in response to the various commands. He found himself in a zone of cool freshness. Then his head was reposing in the crescent of her arm as she slipped the pillow back into place. Only, this couldn't have been the old pillow. It was the pillow of a multimillionaire, monstrous and downy.

"Don't you think that you had better put on a clean nightshirt?" she queried, in a stifled voice.

"Yes."

His answer would have been the same had she proposed that he go out and take a walk. He was only vaguely aware that he was sitting up, that the cool air from the open window was on his bare shoulder.

"Hurry," said Miss Swan, "or you'll catch cold."

Her back was turned to him. He brought his nightshirt down over his head. The whole incident awoke a thousand faded memories and associations from the inner chamber of his mind. The room had become the bedroom of the old farm-house whence he had watched the

nightly pageant of the stars, and that was his mother standing there.

Ah, at last he could sleep!

Miss Swan saw a photograph on the wall. It was the picture of a barn and an apple-orchard. In front of the barn there was a young man at the side of a horse. The photograph was faded, but she recognised the young man as this patient of hers. She also had come from a place like that.

Once more she turned down the light, carefully this time. As she lifted her face she was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes.

She crept out into the corridor and—leaving the key in the door as Alec had asked her to—passed on down the dark stairs to the lower hall.

At her own door she paused for a while. It was very late. Outside the familiar street still showed signs of life. A drunken man staggered past, lurching. A woman slunk by. There was a riotous band of noisy roughs.

Miss Swan shuddered. She shrank into her flat and locked the door behind her.

## Chapter IX

### AS THROUGH A TELESCOPE

RUFUS was sleeping peacefully when Alec came home. Alec was grateful for this. He clutched at his own chance to sleep as a hungry man would clutch at a chance to eat. He swiftly undressed. He crawled into his own luxurious couch. From this he plunged, as from a cliff, into a very abyss of slumber. When he awoke it was to discover Rufus with his eyes open, tranquil and thoughtful.

"You're better," Alec announced with glad surprise.

"Yes," Rufus answered weakly.

"That horse-doctor's better than I thought he was," Alec averred. "He said a change was about due."

Rufus smiled dimly. He continued to look at the ceiling in a state of reverie.

"Did you see the girl from downstairs, Rufe?"

"Miss Swan?"

"Is that her name? I put one over on her in getting her to come up here, Rufe. I guess she thought we'd fall for her."

Rufus was silent.

After a space, Alec dived again into the waters of Lethe. Far into the afternoon he disported himself thus like a playful seal. He slept, he drowsed, he day-dreamed. Suddenly he was jerked, so to speak, to the dry land of complete consciousness.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

"She fed me before she went away," Rufus answered.

"Who?"

"Miss Swan."

"When was that?"

"Not very long before you came home."

"Then, she must have been—— When did she get here?"

"I think it was soon after you went."

Alec kicked back the covers. He swung his feet to the floor and sat up. If he noticed that the flat was cleaner than he had left it the night before he gave no sign of the discovery. He looked at Rufus for a moment. He shook his head. He laughed.

"Well, what do you know about that?" he demanded, pleased and wondering.

He was still chuckling as he went into the kitchen. He was so absorbed in his line of thought that he could not see that here also the saving hand of a woman had been at work. The dishes were clean and neatly arranged. Such food and paper-sacks as had been scattered about were as prim as soldiers on dress-parade. The paint and the brasses shone. Unseeing, unawares, Alec regaled himself with coffee and fried ham. He brought to Rufus a cup of milk and a package of crackers.

"I must have made a hit with her," said Alec.

"She's wonderful," said Rufus.

"She's good-hearted, all right." Alec laughed. "But that's what they say about a lot of the girls here in the Tenderloin. That's part of their trade. They can't work me, though. I have a lot of them try it on me. They come into the chuck-wagon every now and then, give me the glad eye. You can bet your sweet life they pay for their stuff all the same like every one else."

## 60 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Alec had been blind to the growing trouble in Rufus's face. Alec was in a jovial, philosophic mood.

"They can't work your Uncle Dudley," he added with a snicker.

"Miss Swan isn't like the people you mean, Alec," said Rufus slowly. "She's as pure as the driven snow."

Alec exploded into a laugh. "Did you date her up for to-night?"

"No."

"Why didn't you? Never mind. I'll string her along."

"I don't want to impose on her."

"She didn't make any cracks about money, did she?"

"No."

"Then we're not imposing on her," said Alec smartly, as he began to pick his teeth with a match. "It's her own lookout if she gets stung."

"She wasn't after money, Alec," Rufus urged with solemnity.

"Maybe she did do it just for my looks," Alec grinned. "It's all she'll ever get."

By words and sentences, but mostly by the subtler methods of expression common between mortals, they discussed Viola Swan as astronomers would discuss a nebula. There was a blur of light visible through their respective telescopes, something emerged from the blackness of interstellar space. To Alexander Breen the light was a mere delusion, a scientific curiosity. To Rufus Underwood it promised a miracle.

A third astronomer joined the conference.

It was Mrs. Moss. She came in limping and short of breath—somewhat like a fish out of water at first. But she rapidly recovered herself—as if she had been slipped from tank to tank.

She sat down cautiously in a chair, not overly certain

that it would support her weight. Rufus had subsided to a point where it was more comfortable for him to keep his eyes closed. Mrs. Moss studied him at leisure. Then she made a dig with her finger as a sign that Alec approach.

"He's sick," she intimated.

"Getting better," smiled Alec, in pantomime.

"I ain't so sure," Mrs. Moss indicated, pessimistically.

"Be assured by me," Alec signalled, patting himself on the breast.

Mrs. Moss whispered the sequence. She had drawn Alec down. She bubbled the words into his ear: "I can't afford to have no funerals in my house."

Alec's face took on a look of exaggerated but kindly scorn as he wagged a finger, thus indicating that Mrs. Moss's misgivings were unworthy of further concern.

Rufus opened his eyes.

"Mrs. Moss has come to see you," said Alec.

"Hello, Mrs. Moss," Rufus said without spirit.

"We were just talking about the girl in the ground-floor-front," Alec went on, glibly. "Just what sort of a girl is she, anyway, Mrs. Moss?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said Mrs. Moss with weighty deliberation; "I ain't saying what sort of a girl she is. But you're a good-looking young man, Alec. Why don't you find out for yourself?"

"Maybe I will," Alec snickered.

"I never interfere with what my tenants do," Mrs. Moss asserted righteously, "so long as they don't make no noise and pay their rent."

"She was hanging a bluff about coming up here to take care of Rufus," Alec went on, pleased with himself.

## 62 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Mrs. Moss again contemplated Rufus, but her pale eyes were like the eyes of the blind. Alec also cast an amused glance at Rufus, but there was nothing about the appearance of his friend, so far as he could see, to influence the drift of the conversation.

"I guess it must have been to hook you, all right," Mrs. Moss summed up, coming back to Alec.

"Maybe it was just charity," Alec countered playfully.

"Charity won't get you nowhere," Mrs. Moss affirmed, "especially if you're a girl who respects yourself. No girl who's worth her salt is going to waste her time on nights like these setting up with a sick boy. It ain't natural. She's got to be thinking about her rent-money like any one else."

"Well, she's a dope if she thinks I'll come across," said Alec, with a flicker of alarm. Then he grinned. "It ain't my funeral if she gets stuck on me."

"No, but it might be hern," Mrs. Moss said amiably.

She had just delivered herself of this remark when there was a slight, quick *zip* at the door-bell. The door into the hall had been left open by the landlady. Before any of them could move they discovered that the caller was Miss Swan herself.

"Good evening, Miss Swan," Alec exclaimed, jumping up from the edge of the bed where he had been sitting.

The shadows were heavy in the flat even at high noon, and the day had long been on the wane. It was clear that the presence of others there than the sick man had caught Miss Swan by surprise. She didn't speak immediately. She was very human, very young, very appealing. Her big, dark eyes were startled. She carried a large bouquet of early lilacs. Their fragrance, like her presence, suffused the room's grey atmosphere.

Yet, for all that, there was still a suggestion that the others there were astronomers and she a star, and that they were looking at her from telescopic distance.

Her eyes had sought the bed.

“Hello,” she said.

“Can you beat it?” Alec asked, as he and Mrs. Moss made their way together down the stairs in the thickening dusk.

Neither of them had had very much to say to Miss Swan. They had left her there in the sick-room. Alec was on his way to work again. He was refreshed and fortified by his long sleep. His mood, as ever, inclined to the gay. Mrs. Moss’s mood, on the contrary, had instantly become a trifle more sombre on Miss Swan’s appearance. There was a suggestion of this in her words.

“Some girls are such fools!”

“You can see for yourself,” said Alec, “that I didn’t do nothing to lead her on. If she wants to blow herself to flowers, I can’t keep her from it.”

“Here it is the spring-time,” Mrs. Moss lamented, “and the town full of folks with real money willing to get a little sweetness out of life and to pay for it.” She sprang the question with savage intensity surprising in one of her age and phlegm: “*Why ain’t she out on the street?*”

## Chapter X

### NIGHT-WORK

FOR a long time after Alec and Mrs. Moss were gone, Rufus watched this other visitor in silence. He was afraid to speak to her. The things that Alec and Mrs. Moss had said clogged his brain like an infusion of fog. The fog cleared very, very slowly.

Neither did Miss Swan show any immediate desire for speech. She brought a pitcher of water from the kitchen and arranged the lilacs in it. She busied herself in a number of ways, all with the deft and wonder-working skill peculiar to some women in a sick-room. She had moved about in the darkness like one of those creatures who furnish their own light.

But finally she struck a match and lit the gas. She took note of Rufus's devoted eyes. She came over to where he lay and put her cool fingers on his forehead.

"How's the pain?"

"There is none—when you're here."

"I'm to sponge you off," she recited, as if from memory; "and then I'm to give you some broth."

A breeze from the air-shaft wafted the perfume of the lilacs through the room. The gas-light was not very brilliant. It softened the sordidness of the walls and furniture. When Rufus closed his eyes he could recreate that part of his remembered delirium that had made this his room back in Chenango County.

"I'm from the country," he said. "You and the flowers both make me think of the old home."

"I'm from the country, too. That was why——"

He waited. He was so blissful that he could have waited for ever. She had brought a bowl of water to the side of the bed. Her hands were very soft and deft as she sponged him off. He was no longer afraid of her. She had assumed proportions that were as lovely as they were vast. She was a cathedral of a girl.

"That is why, perhaps, I came to see you."

"Have you been in New York long?"

"Not very long. It seems long, though. Lift your arm."

"Where from?" Rufus pursued.

"From Maryland. Did you ever hear of Hagerstown?"

"Yes."

"But you never heard of Clear Spring."

"Tell me about it."

"It's just country," she said; "hills, woods, pastures, peach-orchards. A good many of the peach-trees will be in bloom now, and the birds are making their nests."

The doctor from next door arrived. As the girl had expected, apparently, he was accompanied by another doctor. The new physician was older. He was better dressed. He carried with him an air of autocracy that might have been envied by a judge. He examined Rufus. He tapped him on the side where it hurt. He used a stethoscope. He took twenty seconds to meditate.

"It's progressing favourably," he said.

What else he said was in terms mostly incomprehensible to the laity, but the doctor from next door listened to him with nervous devotion.

## 66 Those Who Walk in Darkness

"And that will be all, I think," said the distinguished one.

The doctors went away. Miss Swan followed them. She had picked up her purse from the side of the lilacs. She put it there again when she returned. On re-entering the room her glance at Rufus had been followed by a swift smile. But she buried her face in the lilacs for a moment or two. When she leaned over him again she had brought the smell of them with her.

It was some time before Rufus could bring himself to ask the question that had sprung up in his mind.

"Did you pay that doctor?" he asked.

His heart pounded while he waited for the answer.

"Foolish boy," said Miss Swan. "The doctor was a friend of mine. That's why I asked him to look at you. He came for nothing."

The answer gave Rufus further grounds for meditation. It was true that a lady like Miss Swan must have hosts of friends, rich and influential. The reflection brought him a sort of bitter joy. How long could she continue to devote her precious time to him? He took up his catechism.

"Then you had friends in New York when you came?"

"I had no friends."

"But you were rich."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know—the way you act, the way you look, the beautiful clothes you wear."

Miss Swan laughed softly. Her big dark eyes were right over him, close enough to his face to see that he was perfectly serious.

"I'm not rich," she breathed, with feeling. "It was

to find work that I came to New York. I thought that it would be easy. I discovered that it wasn't."

"Do you mean," queried Rufus, incredulous, "that there was any one in this town who wouldn't give *you* work?"

"At first they wouldn't," Miss Swan answered softly, bowing her head. Then she looked at him with startled eyes. The expression in her eyes went tender. "Shall I tell you the truth?"

"Yes."

"Why I wanted to see you," Miss Swan went on. "It was because you looked at me like that—spoke to me like that—down there at the door that day."

Rufus couldn't understand, but he felt that Miss Swan's words were somewhat in the nature of an accusation.

"I didn't mean anything bad," he pleaded.

"I know you didn't."

"It was because I thought you were so wonderful."

"No one else ever thought that I was wonderful," laughed Miss Swan softly. "Perhaps if they had I should have found it easier to get along."

"But you didn't find it hard."

"Let's talk about the country. I get so homesick for the country."

Rufus was not to be diverted.

"Alec—he's my friend—told me that no one would find it hard to get along in New York. He does night-work, you know."

"That's the kind I came to at last," said Miss Swan, with a blank look. "Night work." It was a trick of her eyes. They were perpetually focusing on the distance, then coming back again. "I tried and tried—not to."

## 68 Those Who Walk in Darkness

"What sort of work was it?" Rufus asked with interest.

Miss Swan enveloped him in a swift look of doubt. Then she was troubled by an eyelash which demanded her attention for a number of seconds. Finally she discovered that her services were needed in the kitchen.

"I hope you'll like the broth," she murmured.

"But I'm keeping you from your work," he persisted.

"Are you still doing night-work?" Rufus inquired, when she again took her place at his side.

"I'm taking a vacation."

There was something about all this that induced Rufus to believe that Miss Swan was somehow ashamed at having to work at night. He sought to assure her.

"A lot of people work at night here in New York," he said. "Look at Alec. He loves it. And I'm afraid that I've been an awful drag on him, too. He's been trying so hard to hold that job of his. Isn't it that way with you?"

"No."

"Don't you like your position?"

"I've been—been trying to lose it," Miss Swan declared.

## Chapter XI

### THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

ALEC BREEN was wearing a nobby new hat and a bright new necktie as he stepped into the landlady's living-room. He brought to those rather darksome precincts a shimmer of light like that from a silver moth. Mrs. Moss looked up at him with neither pleasure nor anger. Still, there might have been detected in her attitude a certain friendly tolerance.

"Well, here I am," cried Alec, with exuberance. "How are you feeling to-day?"

Mrs. Moss let out a silent bubble of speech, noncommittal.

Alec snickered. He put two fingers and a thumb into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a slim pad of folded bills. No sooner had it touched the red cotton table-cover than they had disappeared. Mrs. Moss had seized them. She could digest them at her leisure. With no great change in her features her friendly tolerance became a shadowy satisfaction.

"I might feel worse," she admitted. "You look pretty slick. Set down."

"Nary a slicker," Alec came back smartly. He removed his nobby hat carefully, so as not to muss his hair. He seated himself. "That must be what the boss thinks. He's raised me."

"Give you more pay?"

"Surest thing you know! He's put me in charge of

a regular restaurant—never closed!—right near Third Avenue and Fourteenth Street!—best location in town! Nobody sleeps down there. They keep the police on the jump, too, believe me. It's no place for a dead one."

"It used to be swell down there," said Mrs. Moss with a gulp of sorrow.

"Still is," Alec affirmed. "Why, not a night goes by but what I see some prize-fighter who gets his name in the papers; and when the burlesque show's out, a lot of those swell dames come in with their fellers. You ought to hear them call me by my front name."

"You're slick, all right," Mrs. Moss commented meditatively, with the air of one who begins to think of some related topic. "How about that friend of yours?"

"Him?" Alec asked. Before he could go on with what he intended to say, Mrs. Moss shot her answer at him.

"*Her!*"

"What about her?"

Alec grinned and rocked. He wasn't adverse to a possible accusation of romantic misbehaviour. He wasn't prepared, however, for the turn that the conversation took.

"She's behind with her rent."

"I haven't got anything to do with that," Alec said. He still grinned, but he was frightened. "You can't say that I egged her on."

"Well, this here Rufus; did you tell me that he had rich relations or something?"

"Where did you get that?" laughed Alec with relief. "He's got a farm, all right, back in Chenango County; and I guess he brought some money along with him. He's give me back what I shelled out for the doctor, and we've split other expenses."

"But what about the girl?" Mrs. Moss demanded. She was tugging at the only part of the theme that interested her. "Has he give her any money?"

"No."

"How do you know he ain't?"

"Because I asked him," Alec came back frankly. "I was sort of joshing him about him trying to cut me out. You know. I didn't give a darn whether the girl was stuck on me or not. And he got kind of sore at me—said something about how he wouldn't insult her by offering her money. She'll get wise to herself pretty soon and see that there ain't any money in it for her from either of us."

"But what if she's in love with him?" Mrs. Moss demanded, with mounting impatience.

"With him?"

"You heard me."

"Say, that's the limit! Her stuck on *Rufus*? Why, the boy's nothing but a rube! He's been sick all the time. Look at him! He's got a front that'd frighten a cop. He hasn't even got a job!"

"I mean what I said," Mrs. Moss affirmed.

"Ah, what's the use?" Alec moaned, not without humour. "You can't tell me nothing. Haven't I seen the way she looked at me? Why, she's just been waiting for me to come up and tag her and tell her that she was it. I keep seeing girls all the time. I'm onto them. They're all alike."

"But listen, Alec. I ain't saying that what you say ain't so. We understand each other—don't we, Alec?—and this is just between you and I. You're right not to be a fool. Only, you know that I can't run my house on nothing, don't you?"

"Sure! I never asked you for tick."

"This girl's two weeks behind. That ain't right; is it? And that ain't the worst, Alec. She's went and hocked all her decent clothes. That shows you how much she respects herself."

It looked as if Mrs. Moss were ready to weep.

"Why, I never noticed that," said Alec blindly.

"And dressed like she is, how is she going to earn anything?" Mrs. Moss moaned. "She might as well go around with a tambourine. She hasn't got a bit of consideration for me. Not only that, but I just feel it in my bones that she's going to get sick, or drink carbolic or something—the pie-eyed squirt!"

Alec was beginning to feel uncomfortable again.

"I tell you I never wanted to egg her on," he expostulated.

"I ain't saying that you did," Mrs. Moss retorted. She regained a measure of calm. "But, anyhow, it's all on account of that farmer of yours. If he hadn't took sick it wouldn't have happened. She ain't been out to work since she's took to going up there. She's been wasting her time on him like he was a millionaire."

"Dog-gone Rufe; he must have told her how much I was making!"

"You don't get what I'm driving at, Alec. You ain't going to let me get a dirty deal, are you?"

"What's the answer?"

"Listen! You go to Rufus, and don't you let on that the girl is stuck on you. You let him think that she's stuck on him. He'll fall for it. He's nothing but a big country boy. And you tell him that his lady friend owes me two weeks' rent and that he ought to come across with it. That's all I want, Alec. As soon as I get that, I can put her out—and she can rot. But I can't do any-

thing until then. My God, Alec; she owes me twelve dollars!"

"Twelve bones, is it?" said Alec. "I'll ask Rufe. I don't see why he should, but he might come across."

"He's young," Mrs. Moss explained.

Alec had arisen. He was making his way to the door slowly, with Mrs. Moss wallowing along at his side. Just as they reached a position where they could look through the glass panel of the door, Mrs. Moss stopped him with a sudden gesture. In the eternal twilight out there they saw the flitting of a deeper shadow.

"That's her, now," said Mrs. Moss. "Suppose you went up and spoke to them while they was together."

Alec grinned. "Maybe she'd want me to come across with part of it myself."

"Don't let her bluff you, Alec. She's nothing but a dirty little hypocrite. I bet her and Rufus have been thinking all along that they was putting something over on you yourself. You speak right up to Rufus and tell him to cough up the twelve. You know how to do it. You know. Be nice about it. But make him come across. It's no more than right."

Alec pulled out a nickel watch that he wore with an elaborate leather fob.

"Let's give them a little leeway," he suggested, with a shade of cunning, "and find out just what they are up to. We got plenty of time."

## Chapter XII

WHEN IT WAS YET DARK

**A**S Viola Swan came into the flat where Rufus was expecting her, he noticed again how small and slender she was. This time, as always before, the observation gave him a tingling shock of surprise and tenderness. While he was still confined to his bed, even after he had been able to sit up, she had loomed over him, actually and symbolically, like an archangel. Even her clothes had appeared finer than they were.

Miss Swan had paused at a distance several paces from him. There was always that attitude of caution in her bearing. Not that she feared him. She smiled at him with perfect friendliness. He noticed, and he had noticed it before, that she was pale.

"I told you that I would come to tell you good-bye," she said, with the end of her smile, then a lingering look at the grey window.

Rufus didn't speak immediately. There were great thoughts and purposes drifting and tumbling in his mind like cumulus clouds on a summer's day. It wasn't easy for him to precipitate them into speech.

"We said good-bye the first time that we ever spoke to each other," he replied thickly. He had intended the remark as a jest, but it sounded merely solemn instead. He cleared his throat. "Where do you think you're going?"

Miss Swan smiled again, and looked seriously askance.

"If you hadn't come to see me," said Rufus heavily, "I'd have come down to see you. I wanted to tell you how much I think of what you did for me."

"It was nothing."

"It was everything. It was more than you can ever know. The very first time that I ever looked at you I—I thought that you were the most wonderful person in the world I had ever seen. I think so now more than ever. Until you came up to this room I wanted to die."

"Why should you have wanted to die?"

"Because—ah—"

As Rufus recalled that time he had seen Miss Swan in her bedroom the blood mounted to his face, his eyes filmed, his voice failed him.

"You are ill again," gasped Miss Swan, alarmed.

"Yes."

Rufus was scarcely conscious of what he was saying. Miss Swan had lost that element of caution, or whatever it was, that had kept her at a distance. Perhaps she had merely intended to touch Rufus's forehead with her finger-tips, as she had so often done before. She approached him, arch, slender, anxious. She was very close to him. Up from her hair and her breast there came that unforgettable fragrance.

"Viola," Rufus whispered.

"Don't! Don't!" she commanded softly.

But she might as well have tried to control the lifting of a tide. His arms encircled her. They scarcely touched her. And yet she was as helpless and thrilled as the iron of an armature. For a moment or two Rufus shut his eyes. He had a reeling sensation that this

## 76 Those Who Walk in Darkness

was a repetition of that experience when his spirit had engulfed her own. Time ceased to exist.

There was a chair near where he had been standing. He sat down. He was dazed. He was only half-conscious of the magnitude of his action, but he had continued to hold her close to him. It came to him like a stupefying revelation that she did not resist.

“Viola,” he murmured again.

She swooned and wilted.

“No, no, we mustn’t,” she whispered gently. But there was no force in her voice, any more than there was in her yielding body.

There followed another interval which was measureless.

Mrs. Moss’s house first dissolved into primordial nothingness, then the clanging and struggling city around them, then the earth and the whole material universe. There was nothing left whatsoever of all the works of the Creator but these two human atoms vibrating in the midst of the infinite void.

“I must be going,” she said at last.

“You’ll never go away from me again,” Rufus laboured. It was as if each word were a ton’s weight.

“You don’t understand,” said the girl.

“Only one thing,” Rufus responded. “I—I love you.”

Very slowly the work of Creation began all over again. the universe swam into being majestically. There was a new earth. New York came back, but all the sounds of it were gay ones. Mrs. Moss’s house was a palace, and this was a palatial room. The pitcher on the old dresser had contained hyacinths a little while before. The hyacinths were faded, dejected when Rufus had last looked at them. But now they filled the air with

regal perfume. They were fresh and multiplied. It was as if the room fairly swam with sunlit fragrance.

"Oh, Rufus," cried Miss Swan with a sudden paroxysm of grief; "I wish I were dead! I wish I were dead!"

He looked down at her. It struck him that she was even smaller and weaker than he had discovered her to be with this new vision of his. He noticed a frayed edging of her jacket. His hand felt the pliant fragility of her side there under her arm. The cry of despair submerged him in yearning and remorse.

"I love you," he repeated, as if it were a prayer.

"Don't! Don't! I can't bear it!"

"I—I hoped——"

"I do! I do! I love you more than life!"

"Then we can get married," he mumbled. He was all but suffocated, like a man facing a gale.

Miss Swan gave herself altogether to weeping. He nursed her, holding her closely to him and rocking her, as if she had been a child. He was enough of a farmer to know something about the maladies of sick animals and flowers. Hers was something that mystified him; but tenderness and time would help. He was breathing deeply. There was a look of awe in his eyes. But he was thinking, going over in his mind what he had to say to plead his cause.

Presently Miss Swan was calmer.

"If you'll marry me," he panted slowly, "I'll turn heaven and earth to be worthy of you."

"You don't know what you say!"

"Viola, unless you do, I die."

"It can't be."

If there were ever a ghost gifted with speech it

## 78 Those Who Walk in Darkness

would probably be with a voice like Miss Swan's when she made this declaration.

"Why not?"

"You don't even know my name."

"It's Viola—Viola Swan."

"No. I changed it."

"What difference does that make?"

"My name is Alice. Call me Alice, just this once."

"Darling Alice!"

"Alice Linn! I changed it because I was ashamed!"

Rufus was silent. With one of his hands he stroked the girl's soft, dark hair. She was hiding her face. But he could feel that her weakness was passing, that she was taking on strength like a refreshed plant.

"I wanted to do right," she went on. "They wouldn't let me. I tried to tell you all about it the first evening that I came up here. I saw that you were so noble. But you wouldn't understand. You wouldn't see. Until now—now—"

Miss Swan was attacked by a fit of shaking.

Rufus sought to soothe her, silently. It seemed incredible to him that she should have anything on her conscience. He thought vaguely of the theatre. The theory might explain that earlier reference of hers to night-work. But there was nothing about that to be ashamed of. On the contrary!

"I'll tell you if it kills me," the girl sobbed with sudden vehemence. "I love you. You're the only one I've ever loved. But I can't marry you. I can't. I can't. I *can't!* I'm a bad girl. Oh, *now* do you understand? *I'm—a—bad—girl!*"

As realisation of just what this meant streaked and flashed itself through the darkness of his understanding, like lightning on a stormy night, Rufus Under-

wood felt his arms slowly coil and tighten about the girl's frail body. She was shaken by a spasm of emotion, and it was as if she were a part of himself. Her head was down. Her neck was bent as for the axe of the executioner. In his own heart he felt that he had spanned all the distance from heaven to hell, but he knew this:

A Voice had said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

The light was white and dazzling. It would have frightened him had he not remembered that he was not alone.

One of his burning hands brushed over her face, slowly forced it upward. She was very white, save for the shadows under her sweeping lashes, the blue veins in her temples.

Perhaps she thought that he was going to kill her. Such tragedies happened every day in this city of New York. But she did not try to escape. She had suffered all she could suffer. Nothing mattered any more, as she herself had said. It was dark, dark, all dark!

Then for her also the darkness broke.

Rufus kissed her. He barely touched her forehead with his lips.

## Chapter XIII

### OUT OF THE SHADOWS

IT was right then that Alec Breen made his entry. Rufus didn't notice him until Alec was well inside, and only then when Alec announced his presence by a snicker of amusement. Rufus looked up. Otherwise he didn't move. The girl might have responded to some impulse to free herself, but it wasn't much of an effort. She was all but helpless in the enfolding arms.

After all, she was there—she was safe; nothing could happen to her.

Alec broke into mirthful speech.

"Go to it, Rufe. Don't mind me. I didn't think you had it in you. Kid, you're sure some fast worker."

"Sh!" warned Rufus with dignity, wholly without anger.

"I don't want to butt in," Alec went on, still highly pleased. "But since you and the lady are such good friends, Mrs. Moss wanted me to tip you off that she's expecting you to come across with the rent." Alec winked. He whispered: "Stall her off, Rufe; she hasn't got anything on you. Of course, you can slip the little lady anything you like."

Alec beamed down at the huddled figure in Rufus's arms. He had seen nothing strange either in Rufus's expression or the attitude of the girl.

"We've been talking things over," said Rufus with

a little gasp, coming back to earth. "I don't think that we'll—be here much longer." He started to rise.

Alec, still grinning, began to back away a little in surprise. Life in the city had taught him that fellows were apt to be eccentric where girls were concerned.

It must have been that Mrs. Moss was waiting at the door. She came in cautiously. It was clear that she, also, was in the presence of something that she did not understand. Possibly she feared a trap. She paused. She peered.

"How do you do," said Rufus, undismayed.

As gently and carefully as if this betrothed wife of his were about two years old, he shifted his position until she was seated on the chair. He whispered something to her of comfort and encouragement. The girl who had adopted the name of Viola Swan, but who was now Alice Linn and would so remain until she became Mrs. Rufus Underwood, nodded her head. She looked at neither Alec Breen nor Mrs. Moss, however. She kept her face in the crook of her arm, and her arm was on the back of the chair.

Mrs. Moss had continued to look at Rufus, silently, expectant.

"How much is it?" Rufus asked softly.

"Twelve."

Rufus brought out a wallet from his trousers pocket. He dug around in it, found a ten-dollar bill and a two. He handed them over.

"I'm glad you're better," said Mrs. Moss.

The money had disappeared as if she had swallowed it whole. She had a slight premonitory movement signalling a return to her usual lurking-place. One would have sworn that it was because there was too much light up here.

"Wait a minute," said Alec Breen, politely, "and I'll be going with you." He turned to Rufus again. "Is that straight?" he asked.

"God's own truth," Rufus replied.

"Then, good-bye and good luck," he said; "I got to be hustling."

The two friends shook hands. Both of them smiled, but their smiles were different.

Rufus smiled like a man who, from the darkness of ignorance, has come into the light and the pain and the glory of knowledge and regrets it not. Alec smiled the indulgent, superior smile of one who is in the darkness of choice and is perfectly satisfied therewith. As for Alice Linn, she was still blinded by her emergence from the darkness of necessity. At least, one would have thought so from the way she kept her eyes covered up.

Altogether, Alec and Mrs. Moss were the most cheerful members of the group, so far as appearances were concerned.

Mrs. Moss had her money. Alec was on his way to mingle with his peers and peeresses at his place of business. Neither of them believed that darkness of any kind enveloped them—not in the least. Far from it!

When the dawn of the new day broke—a baby Aurora of the most gladsome spring even in the Old Tenderloin, with the sparrows chirping under the gritty eaves and the weeds beginning to sprout in the backyards—Mrs. Moss stuck her head out of the window and slanged a milk-man for making too much noise. Having thus performed her matutinal devotions, she swam back into the dark recess of her couch and lay there with her soul at peace.

It was somewhat like that for Alec Breen.

He had been kept late frying sausage for a brace of tipsy small-time stars, the while he laughed and laughed at their sparkling wit. He traversed Union Square. He was still chuckling, trying to recall their patter so that he could use it himself later on. Overhead there was a sky of tender blue and pink which he never saw. He entered the familiar street and made his way with eyes that saw not to the furnished flat.

"Rufe was a dope to leave all this," he reflected, as he crawled into bed. "This is the life."

It was different with Rufus and his mate.

Early in the evening they had gone together to City Hall and secured a marriage license. An alderman, cynical yet paternal, murmured the magic that made them man and wife. Later they had made their way to the Grand Central Station with their scanty baggage, and there they had taken the first train out in the direction of Chenango County. Most travellers would have considered the train an undesirable one. There were none but day-coaches in it. It stopped at every cross-roads and water-tank. It dawdled along, and waited to let lordly freight-trains pass.

But Rufus and Alice didn't mind it. For them it was an excursion into the Promised Land. They sat seraphically side by side all through the night. And most of the time they were too happy for speech. They soared through space, and the marvel and the majesty of the horizons that opened before them were such that they never afterward could tell how much was expectancy and how much was dream.

Dawn found them getting down at their station.

There was no town there, not even a village. It was close to the banks of the Unadilla, and the stillness was such that they could hear the murmuring waters. They

## 84 Those Who Walk in Darkness

started up a deserted, fragrant path fringed and overhung by red haw trees in bloom. The sky was miraculously clear save for the inspiring, lofty processional of a few pink clouds in the east. There was bird-music everywhere. A furry rabbit hopped across the path.

Presently, on the crest of a hill, over against a verdant and mysterious wood, the girl saw a house, then a barn and an apple-orchard—the trees white with bloom. She recognised something that she had seen in a photograph, but a deeper memory had been touched. Clear Spring, in Maryland, was like that.

She looked up at Rufus. He smiled back at her, mystically.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “We’re home!”

## PART TWO: THE SCARLET GHOST

### Chapter I

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

IT was still a little too early in the season, but Jessie Schofield was out looking for wild strawberries.

Jessie was seventeen and tall for her age. It was like her to have sought an opportunity like this to get off by herself. For she was a dreamer—more of a dreamer even than most girls of her age.

There was a dream, now, in her heavy-lidded eyes; hazel eyes they were, but with pupils so large that they appeared to be almost black at times. Her hair was yellow, with reddish-brown depths. And her naturally fair skin was exquisitely tanned, as if both by the open air and her own abundant health; for it had a golden surface, and under this there was a glint of carmine.

This warmth of colour, as well as the general cast of her rather heavy-featured face, gave more than a hint of a nature predominantly physical rather than spiritual. It was physically, rather than spiritually, that she was beautiful and good to look at.

Her movements were lazy, but there was a sort of tireless vigour and grace about them. She strode through the upland pasture quite regardless of the clinging dew.

She wore an old blue calico dress, black stockings, an old pair of low black shoes—an outfit which no amount

of dew could greatly injure. On her head was a blue sunbonnet, loosely tied, and she had let this slip back until her face and the little, fine-stranded curls that stuck to the whiteness of her temples, were exposed.

She paused there in the high pasture. The shiny tin pail she carried contained but a handful of berries as yet, but it was an indifferent glance she cast about her. It was evident that her thoughts were elsewhere.

Gazing for a long time over into the valley of the Unadilla, she could see the roofs of a number of houses there—the village of Rising Sun; but with a barely perceptible shrug of her tender shoulders she continued her stroll.

She found a place where the berries were thick, and continued to pick them until she was tired. Then, seated in the fragrant, drying grass, she permitted herself to dream again—a mysterious, almost mystical, young priestess of the Nature cult.

There was every promise of a warm and slumberous day. The sun was well up, the sky absolutely pure, and there was no suggestion of a breeze. Most of the birds were still by this time. Now and then, very faintly, there came the “gee” and “haw” of a farmer working his team back there somewhere in the direction of the village. But the silence was almost perfect.

The reeling speck of a turkey-buzzard up aloft appeared to be almost the only living thing astir besides herself.

But suddenly Jessie sprang to her feet.

There, only a few inches from where she had been sitting, she could see a gliding length of snake.

The snake was harmless, she well knew. None the less it filled her with that suggestion of panic fear which snakes invariably inspire in most people. Even when

it was gone the sunlit pasture was no longer a pleasant place to loiter in.

Reflecting for possibly a minute, some instinct bade her to get into closer contact with human habitation. But she wasn't willing to forego the pleasure of being alone, however.

To return to the prosaic atmosphere of her grandmother's house, with its monotonous round of small tasks and smaller talk, was more distasteful to her than even the possible society of other snakes. She had an inspiration.

Just beyond the woods, over there, was Rufus Underwood's place. Rufus was a distant relation of hers. Almost every one in this part of Chenango County was more or less related to every one else. And Rufus had gone to New York. This latter fact was but another point in favour of going over to Rufus's house.

For it was of New York she dreamed. Even the vague connection thus established between the deserted farm and her dream-city would, therefore, give her some added illusion of realisation. She had never been to New York, but the lure of the city was stronger upon her than ever. She felt as if she knew it—almost as if it were her own.

Not only had Rufus Underwood gone there; but so had Alec Breen, whom she also knew.

Alec had been there a year now, and to this person and that—chiefly by means of illustrated post-cards—Alec had sent back glowing reports. It was Alec who was responsible for Rufus's departure—to the Promised Land, where no one had to work very hard for a living, where there was no milking to do, where no one got up early, where a million lights made night brighter than day, where no one was ever lonely.

## 88 Those Who Walk in Darkness

Not only this, but Jessie had a fund of information unsuspected of her kith and kin.

Up in the attic of her grandmother's house she had discovered a certain book which she had since treasured with the utmost secrecy. It was called, "Metropolitan Life Unveiled, or Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities."

The introductory chapter of this book was headed, "The Great Maelstrom of Vice." Jessie knew the first sentence of this book by heart. It read:

"First in the category of America's cities stands New York; first in size, first in wealth, and *first in all the abominations which curse humanity!*"

There were various sub-titles—"The Dangers to which Beautiful Women Are Exposed"; "Forbidden Dalliances, which Modesty Refuses to Describe." The book was copiously illustrated with wood-cuts.

Jessie had read all the text not once, but many times, had lingered over the pictures until they were photographed in her brain. When she went to the city it would be as one forewarned. So she told herself. And she would see for herself all these things—even those "forbidden dalliances, which modesty refused to describe."

The hint of peril merely increased the fascination.

She went through the silent and darkling woods with the abstracted air of one who is perfectly at home in such surroundings. As a matter of fact, she had haunted these woods like a nymph almost ever since she could remember, and, coming out into the old wood-road beyond, followed this to the crooked rail-fence that enclosed the orchard, and scrambled over the fence as nimbly as a boy. It was with the gait of a boy—loose-

jointed, high-breasted, shoulders back—that she swung down over the rounded hill.

About the farm there hung that heavy silence which always seems more oppressive in a place where the familiar and expected sounds are missing. No dog barked, no hens cackled, no horse whinnied, no cattle lowed. The very bees appeared to be spellbound, their droning muted.

Any deserted house is a proper temple for dreams, especially if this be the house of a deserted farm, far from neighbours; still more if the owner of it happens to be one of those who have gone over the horizon into the mysterious world outside.

Jessie felt this. When she was but half-way through the orchard her dreams were possessing her again, utterly. Rufus had gone. So also would she go, one of these days.

She came to the fence separating the orchard from what was called the "door-yard," then stopped short. Suppressing an exclamation which had formed itself on her parted lips, her breath and her pulse quickened in a way which had nothing to do with her supple descent of the hill.

The house had a back porch—long, shadowy, low-eaved. On this porch some one lay as if asleep—or dead!

Jessie had made sure of a number of details before she undertook her next move.

The person who lay there like that was a girl, apparently but a little older than herself; and not dead—if even asleep—for she had moved with languid comfort. Moreover, the door from the house to the porch was open, thus hinting that the stranger had a right to be

where she was; that she possibly belonged, in some way as yet undefined, to Rufus Underwood himself.

There was a further hint of this in the girl's garb. For, even while she was still on the far side of the fence, Jessie could see that the stranger was, to a large extent, undressed.

Was it possible that Rufus had returned from New York? Was it possible that here was some one he had brought with him?

The suppositions brought to Jessie's mind a gust of eagerness. Softly, she climbed over the fence, advanced for a closer view.

She felt as a scientist might feel when he comes upon a specimen from some other world.

## Chapter II

### THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT

THE strange girl was sound asleep.

Jessie soon became sure of this, also that the house was otherwise deserted. It gave her an opportunity to study the specimen with absorbed and minute attention, and she proceeded to do so with a sort of passionate comprehension.

Her first survey had been sufficient to confirm her initial supposition that this was no mere country girl, but one indeed from the city. And there was only one city which could produce a girl like this—New York!

The stranger had taken off her hat and much of her clothing, and had let down her hair. Her arms and shoulders, her feet and her ankles, were bare. She lay curled up on the worn, weather-cleaned floor of the porch like a tender young mermaid left in a grotto by the receding tide.

Jessie was sure that she had never seen any one so beautiful.

She was colourful, warm, and moist. Her hair was darker than Jessie's own. It was fine and luxuriant and not very long. Her pink lips were parted over small white teeth. There was a childish flush on her cheeks close up under the sweeping lashes. The small hands were a revelation to the country girl. She had never seen such nails, pink, burnished until they glistened like mother-of-pearl.

The clothing which the girl wore, and that which she had laid aside, exerted as great a fascination over Jessie as the stranger did herself.

There was a brassiere, embroidered, with a thin pink ribbon through it, which seemed to be the very quintessence of feminine luxury; a green silk petticoat but partly concealed other linen no less Sybaritically fine.

It recalled a phrase of that book of hers—"Beauty in lustrous garniture."

A pair of grey half-shoes, somewhat worn, but fine, and shapely from the owner's feet, lay in the grass-grown path below the porch. A little further along, on the porch itself, lay her grey silk stockings, so sheer and shrivelled that they might have been two crumpled bits of veil.

There was a greater semblance of order about the little green-lined jacket and green-hemmed skirt she had laid aside at the back of the porch; but inadequately hidden under these, as if hastily, by an afterthought, were her ridiculously small and dislocated corsets. They were even such corsets as Jessie had never seen—pink, supple, slight.

Nodding on the heads of the tall grass out near the old-fashioned well, where there recently must have been some great ablutions, to judge by the amount of water splashed about, there was a fragile little silk waist and a small handerchief.

Jessie, getting bolder and bolder, and also increasingly fascinated, drew closer yet. After all, Rufus Underwood was a relative. This was Rufus's place. She had a right to be there.

At last she was almost within touch of the girl who slept. Stealthily, she sat down on the edge of the porch

to continue her inspection. As she did so, her senses were assailed by a new delight.

The atmosphere surrounding the sleeper was filled with a most delicious perfume. It was extremely delicate, and so faint as to be scarcely perceptible even here. And yet there was that about it that stirred Jessie profoundly, far more than the smell of syringas, even—a scent of which she was passionately fond. This perfume was one such as she had never imagined; and yet she seemed to recognise it.

It was a perfume that quickened every longing in her heart, brought up fragments of every dream she had ever entertained concerning New York.

Presently the sleeper stirred. She was like a child, with her head pillow'd on her slender arms; but she was like a child disturbed by evil or exciting dreams. Her small hands tightened convulsively. She murmured something that was almost articulate. Still, her sleep continued profound for the time being. Her movements did not awaken her even when she lay momentarily on her back, then turned to her side again, unconsciously seeking a more comfortable position.

As she thus moved, once more there billowed up from her scant garments a faint gust of perfume. A leisurely butterfly, black and yellow, must have been attracted by the fragrance just as Jessie had been, for it hovered over the sleeping girl's face. Jessie thrust out her hand to drive the butterfly away.

As she did so the stranger opened her eyes.

Her eyes were dark. They were startled—possibly by some dream-figment, rather than what they saw now; for it was clear that the girl saw nothing very distinctly for an interval. Then she uttered a little gasp, sat up.

The two girls were face to face.

She who had slept made an impulsive movement as if to cover her bare shoulders. But she recognised the futility of this, for the moment at least. Her startled eyes swept the near landscape, saw no one else there. She looked at Jessie again—this time with a dawning smile.

Jessie also, frightened at first, now was recovering herself.

"Don't let me worry you," she said. "I'm the only one here, I guess. My name is Jessie Schofield. Rufus Underwood is a relation of mine."

"Rufus!" the sleeping beauty gasped prettily. "I was waiting for him. I was afraid to stay in the house all alone. It was so still! I came out here. I didn't expect to see any one else." All this was by way of apology and explanation. "So you are a relative—Jessie!—Jessie Schofield! I am so glad to know you, Jessie!"

She hesitated a moment, as if doubtful as to what course she should pursue. Jessie wasn't helping her any—not yet, being too overcome by wonder at hearing the apparition speak. But then the strange girl laughed. Impulsively she put her hands on Jessie's shoulders, drew Jessie toward her, kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Jessie was ravished.

"I know some one else in New York," she said, as if by way of establishing some claim to distinction.

"Do you?"

"He knows Rufus, too. His name is Alec Breen—Alexander Breen."

"Oh, are you a friend of his? We all lived in the same house. It was through him that we got acquainted. I am very deeply indebted to him. Almost, you might say, it was thanks to him that—I am here."

Jessie was trying to fathom the mystery.

"Did you come here with Rufus?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I didn't even know that Rufus was coming home. I thought he was still in New York. I thought he was going to stay there. Where has he gone to?"

"He went—he said it was to his Uncle Joel's—to tell them that we had arrived, to get some things to eat. Nobody expected us. We got in early this morning."

All the time that the strange girl was saying this there was a suggestion about her of important information withheld. She was nervous, excited. Her dark eyes flashed out into the shimmering distances, came back to Jessie Schofield, with a smile, with an appeal, which merely served to increase Jessie's delight and bewilderment.

"Are you Rufus's friend?" Jessie asked.

She was still trying to plumb that mystery. Her question was one of encouragement.

The other looked at her, startled, as if the truth which she was about to reveal was as great a cause for astonishment to herself as it could possibly be to any one else. She whispered her response:

"I'm Rufus's wife!"

Jessie greeted the announcement with a little cry of joyful amazement.

"You!"

"Are you sorry?"

"I think it's wonderful," cried Jessie. "I think you're wonderful. Oh, what's your name?"

"Viola——"

The name had slipped from the pink lips of little Mrs. Rufus Underwood before she had time to think. And before she had a chance to correct herself the girl in front of her had seized upon the name.

"Viola! I love that! Oh, I love you! Let me call you Viola!"

She put out her hands in turn, drew Rufus's wife to her, kissed her rapturously.

"No, no! That isn't what I meant," said young Mrs. Underwood, hastily, with an undercurrent of desperate haste. "I am Alice, sweetheart. Call me Alice."

Jessie was absorbed, inquisitive.

"Why not Viola?" she pleaded. "Oh, you look like Viola to me, not Alice. Viola—that just describes what you looked like to me when you were lying there asleep. You were so beautiful. You were so like what I always thought a New York lady must be. Your clothes are so beautiful, and your hands, and your hair, and the perfume you use is so lovely! You're Viola!"

Young Mrs. Underwood trembled slightly. That startled look which was forever coming and going in her large, dark eyes had returned again, remained there as Jessie spoke. The name was having upon her almost the same effect as the sight of the black snake had upon Jessie back there in the upland pasture.

And she knew it, now—that while she slept, here on the porch of her husband's house, in this place of refuge which was to become her home, so far from New York, from Mrs. Moss's lodging-house, so far from the Old Tenderloin; in her dreams she had ceased to be Mrs. Rufus Underwood, or the Alice Linn of her girlhood. No, she had become once more the Viola Swan from which she had hoped to flee. And that was the reason why the name had come to her lips in response to this girl's question.

"Call me Alice, dear," she pleaded softly, with a frightened smile. "You will, won't you?"

"Yes."

"And never refer to Viola again. I don't like the name. That must have been why it sprang up when you asked me what my name was. I guess I just wasn't thinking."

## Chapter III

### CONCERNING NEW YORK

VAGUELY it may have occurred to Jessie Schofield that Alice's disliking for the name of Viola was strange and insufficiently explained, but this was merely an added touch of mystery where all was mysterious.

And Rufus's wife awake was even more mysterious and fascinating than she had been when she slept.

Jessie sat there and looked at Alice, tried to fit her into the New York of her book, "Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities." Both girls were intuitional. Each recognised how different was the character of the other. Yet the bond of friendship between them had been instinctive, was immediately strong.

Uncle Joel's place was more than a mile away. So Jessie told Alice. They had time to talk.

Refreshed by the cold water of the well and by her nap, brief though it had been, young Mrs. Underwood was dressing herself, coiling up her hair, in view of the possibility that Rufus should not return alone. And all the time that she was doing this, Jessie watched her out of her hazel eye, their pupils dilated more widely than ever.

"Didn't you love it down in New York?" Jessie asked.

"No! I'll love it here."

"What did you do down there?"

"Suffered, mostly—until Rufus came along."

"Were you ever tempted?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, were you ever almost swept into the 'Maelstrom of Vice'?" The girl whispered the question.

"Jessie dear!"

"It must be wonderful to be tempted! They say that all young girls are who go to New York. I want to go there, some day. Do you suppose that I—I'll be tempted?"

"Let's not talk about such things," little Mrs. Underwood proposed hastily. "Do you think that Rufus's people will be glad to see me? Will they be glad that he married me? We were just married last night. We started for Rising Sun right after the ceremony. It took us all night."

Jessie impulsively seized Alice's hand and kissed it.

"They'll be glad he married you when they see you," she declared. "Oh, now that I've seen you I don't know how I ever lived here without you! Why did you suffer in New York?"

Jessie pressed Alice's fingers to her lips again as an encouragement to confidence. She whispered her next question, also, ingratiatingly: "I suppose you often ran across 'The Gay Lotharios of the Four Hundred'?"

The sun was slowly mounting higher. The sky was of a transcendent purity. Now there was just enough movement in the air to bring in with it to the shadow of the porch the breath of clover and wild roses, of flowering locusts and honeysuckle. But, for the second time—or the third, or the fourth—since opening her eyes, the girl who had been Viola Swan felt her vision obscured, her other senses yield to a haunting illusion.

The fair prospect of woods and fields, untenanted except by bees and butterflies, went out; and, in place of it, there again was the squalid street in the Old Ten-

## 100 Those Who Walk in Darkness

derloin where Mrs. Moss had her lair, where she herself had sought refuge like a hunted thing.

The smell of the flowers was gone. It was the mingled reek of gasoline and chop suey, of garbage and cheap perfumes, which once again momentarily sickened her.

She started to speak, paused, clutched the fingers that were caressing her own.

Through her mind there glimpsed the thought that here at her side, in the guise of Jessie Schofield, was really the Alice Linn who had been herself a little more than a year ago; the Alice Linn who was getting ready to leave just such surroundings as these for the big city; her head filled with the doubts and surmises and expectations of this other girl.

A mental step, and she saw herself in New York friendless and bewildered; saw herself turning to the old woman who managed the house where she had taken a flat; saw herself beguiled, tricked, disillusioned, committed to the road that led down over the nameless abyss; felt her feet once more slipping, faster and faster, until she clung, when it was almost too late, to Rufus Underwood and found him steadfast.

There was more than a suspicion of moisture in Mrs. Underwood's eyes, but she smiled and tossed up her head.

"What an odd girl you are to talk about such things," she said with mild reproval. "Tell me all about yourself and your family. Rufus has hardly had the time yet to tell me about anything."

"Oh, the family!" exclaimed Jessie, with a shade of lazy contempt. "You'll have plenty of time to find out all about them. They'll do enough talking about themselves and their aches, and their ancestors, and every-

thing, as soon as you give them a chance." Then she whispered enticingly: "Passion must be a wonderful thing!"

"What makes you think so?" queried Alice, startled.

"Oh, I've read a lot," Jessie volunteered; "Swinburne, Charlotte Brontë, Mrs. Browning."

"You'll think me very ignorant, Jessie, dear; but I've never read anything by these people you mention."

"To read of things—that was my only chance," Jessie reflected aloud with unconcealed regret. "I probably shouldn't read, either, if I could live in a place like New York—live romance at first hand instead of being forced to get it all out of books."

Alice Underwood stole a swift glance at the girl at her side. Jessie, unconscious that she had said anything to stir her new friend's most poignant memories—a nightmare barely lulled—was merely affectionate, was speaking with the growing abandonment of one long denied the audience of a kindred spirit.

"New York is full of girls who would give anything to live in a place like this," said Alice; "to change places with you, Jessie."

"They'd want to change back again before very long," Jessie sighed with conviction. "The boys are nothing but yokels, the grown-ups are—respectable. Respectability! How I loathe respectability! They seem to have absolutely no conception of the hunger of a young girl's soul, or of the cosmic urge, or anything."

She met Mrs. Underwood's eyes, let herself go in a little transport of enthusiasm and affection only slightly shaded by bashfulness.

"Oh, I just know that we're going to be friends," she exclaimed breathlessly; "that you'll tell me all about your life there, your adventures!"

"Adventures—what adventures?"

"I don't know; but you must have had them! I just feel as if you must have had adventures, you're so—so romantic!"

"I'm not romantic, Jessie. Besides, I think that what you call romance is often merely—sadness, tragedy!"

"There's nothing so utterly tragic as a lack of romance," Jessie retorted, then smiled engagingly. "Just to see those darling corsets of yours was quite enough to turn my head. You won't mind if I say so—will you—may I call you Alice? I'll call you that other name in my heart—but I found those corsets of yours positively thrilling—like something unrespectable, something almost immoral!"

She laughed, and gazed out over the shimmering surface of the earth. Mrs. Underwood also gazed away. Once more their eyes met, held, questioning, friendly, yet not quite at poise.

"I want to show you a book I have," said Jessie, "and you'll tell me how much of it is true."

"What sort of a book?"

"One that describes New York—and other great cities." An extra flush mounted under the gold of her complexion. "It isn't a book I'd care to show to everyone."

"Will you do me a favour, dear?" Alice asked.

"Anything!"

"Go and see if Rufus is coming."

Left alone, the former Viola Swan sat wide-eyed for a space where Jessie Schofield had left her. Presently, as a feeling of uneasiness in her breast increased, she got up and turned to the house. But the prospect of the empty, brooding rooms held her where she was. Quite unexpectedly, she began to sob.

She checked herself by a desperate effort.

She was trying to think, trying to get a grip on this new life in which she found herself. Was it possible that that old "Terror by Night" was going to haunt her here, even as it had back there in the fetid atmosphere of the Old Tenderloin?

She recalled her recent dream—the dream in which she had ceased to be Alice Underwood, had become once again the Viola Swan of Mrs. Moss's lodging-house. She recalled the undisguised intuitions of Jessie Schofield, as unerring as they were unconscious.

There was a shudder in her heart.

She forced a smile. She quickly turned and looked out over the blues and yellows of the sun-warmed grass. She saw the youth who had married her—Rufus Underwood!

Like a young pioneer he looked—a trifle gaunt, but fair, upstanding, powerful. Over his shoulder was a sack of provisions which he was bringing back with him from his Uncle Joel's. And this was to be the beginning of their honeymoon.

She fluttered her hand in welcome.

## Chapter IV

### KITH AND KIN

**D**IDN'T your family hate to lose you?"

"I have no family," Alice answered, with a soft, quick glance about her.

It was Rufus's grandmother, Aunt Allie Beeman, who asked the question. She was flat-chested, dignified, almost seventy, a nugget of human kindness with a grim exterior. But it was Uncle Joel who sprang the proper response to that remark of Alice that she had no family.

"You've got one now," he exploded.

Uncle Joel almost always exploded his remarks, which is a common enough trait among men who are chiefly silent.

Uncle Joel was close to sixty. There was a certain largeness about all his movements. From profound abstraction he could break into a dazzling, personal smile. From apparent vacuity he would drop his head forward in his hands with the sigh of an overburdened thinker.

There were four or five others present: Aunt Mary Kennedy, Joel's wife; Andy Jones, a sort of distant cousin to them all, who sometimes worked with Uncle Joel and sometimes with Rufus; Cole Beeman, another uncle to Rufus, and Cole's wife, who had driven over from their place near Bainbridge.

The reception was taking place in the Kennedy parlour, which was every whit as prim and respectable and

free from any taint of worldliness as was Aunt Allie's self. In this respectable room young Mrs. Rufus Underwood sat very straight in her straight-back chair, looking about her with her large dark eyes, very serious, a little frightened, eager to smile, yet eager to appear grim and respectable, too.

These people were not strangers to her. They might have been the neighbours of her childhood, and this very parlour the parlour of almost any house in Clear Spring, back in Maryland.

Yet she was an exotic.

Her clothes were different. She wore them differently. About her there was an air of mystery—disquieting to the womenfolk, alluring to the men—which was as native to her as the colour of her hair.

“Well, weren’t your friends surprised when you told them that you were going to marry Rufus?” Aunt Allie pursued gently.

“I had no friends—except Rufus,” Alice answered.

She cast her eyes down at Rufus. He was seated on a hassock at her feet, partly owing to the fact that there were not enough parlour chairs to go round, partly just to be near her.

“You were living all alone—in New York?” Aunt Allie queried.

“That’s the way everybody lives in New York,” Rufus asserted loudly. “You never saw such a place. Nobody has relations there. Nobody has friends, you might rightly say. Why, grandma, if some one dropped in on you for supper in New York, unless they got a regular invitation two or three days in advance, you’d think they were crazy.”

Andy Jones spoke up. He had been sitting there all evening devouring Alice with his eyes and trying to

conceal the fact. He was thirty and a bachelor. Now and then he preened his yellow moustache. He had been to New York once on an excursion.

"Sure, that's the way it is in New York," he said seriously. "It's only natural. Food's a good deal finer there than it is here."

He was playing to put himself on the side of the New Yorkers. The strange Mrs. Underwood rewarded him with a shy and flitting smile. Andy preened his moustache.

"It must be very hard—and dangerous—for a young girl," said Aunt Allie, with mild sorrow.

"How'd you and Rufus come to meet?" Cole Beeman asked heartily.

It was Rufus who answered.

"She nursed me while I was sick—saved my life."

"Yes, but who introduced you?"

"Alec Breen," Rufus asserted.

"Oh, so you knowed Alec, did you?" Cole went on, with whole-souled good nature. "Well, Alec's family never amounted to anything; but I guess he's all right—a little pert, a little flip! Know him long?"

"I can't rightly say that I know Mr. Breen at all," Alice began modestly.

"They were just living in the same house; that's all," Rufus hastened to explain. "You know! They had the same landlady. The landlady was a great friend of Alec's. Her name was Mrs. Moss."

Little Mrs. Underwood winced and hid it as best she could by adjusting her modest but fascinating hat.

"Alec always was a great hand at scraping up friends," Cole Beeman asserted cheerfully.

The assertion brought a loud and unexpected guffaw

from Mr. Andy Jones. He checked it promptly, stroked his yellow moustache with a reminiscent smile.

Rufus clung to a subject which he felt to be safe.

"Alec's running a lunch-wagon, down there in New York. He's a slick customer, all right. Says he's going to be a sandwich-king some day. Reckon he's right, too. You ought to see him when he gets a lead quarter or a nickel with a hole in it——"

But the others present were not to have their interest diverted from Rufus's wife.

"What church did you belong to, child?" Aunt Allie inquired.

"I—I—was baptised a Presbyterian," answered the little Mrs. Rufus.

"Did you have a good minister?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you bring a letter to the congregation here?"

Rufus broke in hurriedly.

"Shucks, grandma! We didn't have time for all those things."

But the family was waiting for Alice to answer.

"I—didn't get to church very often—in New York," she replied, with something of the haunted in her voice.

Uncle Joel exploded again. He dropped his head forward in his hands, then threw himself back.

"That don't matter," he shouted. "Mary," he demanded, "how about some of that cocoanut cake you baked to-day?" He flashed one of his brilliant and unexpected smiles on Rufus's wife. "We're all Baptists here," he elucidated, "but that don't mean that we're any better than anybody else."

He got up and stretched himself.

"Yea, Lord," he said, "we're all of us poor, miserable sinners."

He checked words and gestures abruptly, smiled again at Alice, then trundled off to help his wife in the business of hospitality.

Rufus and Alice walked home. They had refused the invitation to spend the night at Uncle Joel's. They had declined Andy Jones's offer to drive them over in one of Uncle Joel's buggies. Rufus had sensed Alice's wishes in this, and Rufus was as one possessing authority, especially now that he was married, and Uncle Joel had helped a lot by supporting them in their wish to be alone.

Both of them were silent for a long time. They were passing through a private lane connecting the two farms. Most of the time they were out under the open sky, and the sky was lit by a million more stars than are ever visible in New York.

But at times the lane dipped through hollows where great willow-trees arched overhead, and the damp, cool darkness was fragrant with mint. In such a place, where not even the stars could see, Rufus stopped and pressed the girl up close to him.

"They all like you; they think you're wonderful," he whispered.

"Oh, Rufus!" she breathed.

There may have been something of uncertainty, something of fear, in her voice.

But that was all that was said.

## Chapter V

### DOMINION

THE home to which Rufus had brought his bride was as good as any country girl might have wished for—thirty-two acres, rich, well drained.

For almost a century it had been held by the Underwoods and their kin—farmers to a man, who had conserved the fertility of their land as a family of bankers would conserve a financial patrimony.

The house, as already intimated, was likewise old; but it was comfortable—two stories, of ample dimensions, adapted to human occupancy by slow years of accumulated adjustment and selection. Houses evolve, like any other physical container of life. That's what this had done until it had become a home fit for any one.

There was stable room for three horses and as many cows, room for uncounted chickens and ducks, turkeys, guinea-fowl, pigeons. It would have surprised any one to see how rapidly the place they had found deserted became a sort of live-stock metropolis.

For the most part this was Alice's work.

Day and night, consciously or subconsciously, the girl, who had been Viola Swan, was confronted by a definite problem.

It was this:

Could a girl who had escaped, as had she, from the morass ever be clean again, ever become as other women,

ever earn the right to stand up, without fear and without reproach, before herself, her neighbours, and her God?

She didn't try to answer this question immediately, but instead kept her mind away from it as much as she could. She was sickened by the vague terrors which surrounded it. All she could do was to hope.

Instinctively she saw that her only foundation for hope was in service—love and work. It was through such service—to Rufus, when he lay sick and alone in Mrs. Moss's house—that she had dragged herself from the morass of the Old Tenderloin in the first place. A continuation of it now would, perhaps, furnish the answer to that problem of hers.

She started out to do for every living thing what she did for Rufus. Only now she was making a conscious effort to make things and people love her. Perhaps, like that, she could make every one and everything regard her as Rufus regarded her.

Rufus owned a rough old hound named Duke—inclined to be sullen and suspicious in his attitude toward strangers. But, if Duke had been human and Alice his mother, Duke's attachment couldn't have been stronger than it was after the first hour of their acquaintance.

He would look up into Alice's face with his sage, brown eyes, alert for her slightest sign, batting the floor with his heavy tail.

"He doesn't care," whispered Alice to herself, "if I was Viola Swan—before I became myself again."

There was a black gelding called Jake, which had been frightened out of his wits when very young by a playful farmhand with a coat over his head. Jake had never been worth his oats since then, although he had grown superbly in bone and beauty. It seemed a pity to kill

such a fine animal. Pity was about all that had saved him. It was as if he forever feared to see every other human creature, who approached him suddenly, go headless and begin flapping his arms—as the farm-hand had done.

But Alice cured Jake just as she had cured the delirious Rufus.

She and Rufus were standing near the barnyard one evening shortly after the stock had been brought back from Uncle Joel's. She had just heard about Jake. She and Rufus had watched him—beauty and feebleness of intellect do so often go hand in hand—as he mooned about the stable-yard. Then, suddenly, Alice turned and flashed another quivering glance at Jake. She stepped over to the fence, and Jake, forgetful of that fright of his, put out his sensitive muzzle until she could touch it.

Only just then Rufus also started forward; and Jake, with a squeal and a snort, reeled and bolted.

But, none the less, that was the beginning of Jake's redemption. The time came, not so long afterward, when he sported his headstall like a badge of honour; then, when he fairly loved to use his supple strength to snake a wagon over the pleasant dirt roads by day or night.

“Rufus,” said Uncle Joel meditatively, as he watched Alice moving about the stable-yard one morning with both Jake and Duke following her about, step for step, “the critters do seem to take after that wife of yours.” He hesitated and then reflected. “And they say that critters do show God’s own judgment in that respect.”

Rufus, at work greasing the axles of a farm-wagon, slipped one of the heavy wheels back into place and gave it a spin.

“She’s that way with all sorts of critters,” he said

seriously. "I never saw a girl like her. I guess the good Lord must 've broke the mould when he run her off."

He also looked at Alice.

The strange part about it—to Rufus, and to Uncle Joel, perhaps—was that she didn't look like a farmer's wife. There was a fragility and a grace about her, especially when she was seen from a distance, more especially still when she was thus surrounded by the heavy strength of a farmyard.

She wore a short, full skirt of figured cotton and a short-sleeved sailor-blouse that was open at the throat. Her luxuriant hair was free, except for a comb on either side. It brushed out soft and thick no lower than her shoulders. She wore black stockings and solid, low shoes, and as she pulled her skirt aside to cross a ditch, her slender and shapely legs were momentarily visible quite up to the knees. Then she disappeared into the shadows of the barn.

"She's that way with all sorts of critters," said Rufus, trying to recollect where he had left off.

Uncle Joel had little eyes, brilliant and kind, pale blue. His complexion was ruddy. His eyes were still fixed on the stable-door through which Alice had disappeared.

"I dare say," he murmured.

"It's right," said Rufus, going on with his work. "She's got a covey of quail that feeds every morning along with her Rhode Island Reds. She can walk among them just like she can among her chickens. And haven't you noticed how thick the birds have been here of late all around the house?"

"I have that," said Uncle Joel, with the air of one who doesn't speak his whole mind.

"Bluebirds and robins," Rufus went on. "Say, she just naturally feeds the old mother-birds right on the

nest! She's even got a woodcock settin' where she can go right up and put her hand onto it."

"Yes, and other kinds of birds," drawled Uncle Joel, as he displaced himself from the rail where he had been sitting. It was almost as if he had made some allusion to himself.

Perhaps he alluded to other men.

A good many of them had got the habit of dropping over to Rufus's place every time they could, whether there was any special occasion for it or not.

There was a lot of work to do about the place, and they were only too glad to help Rufus do it; help him jack up the wagon when he greased the axles, help him hold the board when he had nails to drive, help him grind his tools. But all the time every one of them had an eye out for a sight of Rufus's wife.

They were perfectly respectful about it. If there was any one quality more than another in those glances of theirs it was a touch of awe.

She was different from the girls most of them were used to. There was something back of those dark eyes of hers that made them speculate, and dream a little, and yearn somewhat, perhaps; and stir their thoughts when they were alone again.

There were other elements of this fascination; the odds and ends of the pitiful little trousseau she had brought with her from New York—souvenirs of the life that was—the moving fragrances of crafty perfumes—the pink silk sweater—transparent stockings—a lilac kimono; but, most of all, the delicate face, the lithe and tender shape, the bold yet modest friendliness.

Rufus must have been aware of this lure his wife had for other men. But his heart was tranquil.

It was—until one night.

## Chapter VI

### A PAIR OF HAMES

IT was one of those nights in midsummer when the country itself seems to be under some sort of a thrall—when the air is not too hot, but very soft; with just enough breeze to drift along the smell of clover; cloudy and dark, with a little quaver of heat-lightning now and then, and the fireflies looking for something they've lost in the underbrush; when everything else is in a swoon, or hushed and expectant.

The roses had come out lush and thick all about the Underwood cottage; so had the yellow honeysuckle which covered all of the front fence. There were a couple of acres of red clover which had been cut that day just to the south of the house, and that was the direction the breeze came from. The clover was safe. It was cloudy, but it wasn't going to rain. Uncle Joel had said so. And not once in twenty years had Uncle Joel ever been mistaken.

The great stillness, so heavily fragrant, so much more heavily freighted yet with mystery, enveloped Rufus and his bride, held them in the same embrace as it might have held Adam and Eve before the angel appeared with the flaming sword.

They lay at an open window looking out into the night. "What are you thinking about?" Rufus whispered.

There was a long pause.

"Many things," Alice answered softly. "My thoughts

are like those fireflies out there—just little points of light moving around, then going out, in the midst of all that darkness. There's so much that we don't know, can never know."

"Except that it will be broad daylight to-morrow morning," said Rufus with a touch of symbolism.

"What were you thinking about?" asked Alice, after an interval.

"About the great things that lie ahead of us," Rufus answered. "My thoughts are like the heat-lightning over there. Look! When it shimmers it makes the clouds look like the rocky coast-line along an empty sea. That's our country. We're lying on the prow of a ship that's headed in that direction. We're to discover it, make it known to the rest of the world."

It was a night of magic. The tepid perfume billowed in upon them.

Then Duke barked.

For those who could understand, Duke spoke a language which needed no words to make it clear. His present bark meant that some one was coming who had a right to come.

Minutes later they heard the familiar voice of Andy Jones. Andy had become one of the most frequent visitors of all.

"Hey there, Rufe!"

Rufus answered him.

"Hello there, Andy; what can I do for you?"

"Didn't suspect you folks went to bed so early er I wouldn't have bothered you," said Andy. "Say, Rufe, can you loan me a pair of hames?"

"Sure," said Rufus; "take anything you want."

"Had some hauling to do," Andy explained, "and

thought I'd get an early start. Where'll I find them, Rufe?"

"Hanging on the rack on the right-hand side as you go in the barn," Rufus answered. "Want a lantern?"

Andy had come around until he was right under the window where they were, but it was so dark they couldn't see him. He made some jocular remark about having eyes like a cat. He trudged away. They knew that he would be back to thank them and bid them good night.

By and by they could hear him fussing about in the barn, could hear him swearing softly to himself.

"Dog-gone it," Rufus mumbled; "I guess I'll have to light the lantern for him. Dog-gone it!"

"Sh! Don't swear," said Mrs. Rufus playfully. "I'll go."

Rufus had worked hard from break of day. Into his fibres had crept the first delicious lethargy of rest. He surrendered himself to it. Alice leaned over him—just half reality and half luxurious dream—and as her lips met his he felt the delicate caress of her hair and her sheer and fragrant nightgown. Then she was gone.

The sensation of this little leave-taking was a lasting one so far as Rufus was concerned. For him it seemed all a part of the languorous night, of the new universe which enveloped him.

But by and by the night underwent a subtle change.

A solitary cricket, which sounded as if it were right there in the room, started up its music. A beetle droned in from the darkness and began to knock around in its quest for a way out. Suddenly Rufus sat up.

He listened. He heard nothing. It seemed to him that Alice had been gone a very long time. That last kiss of

hers and the contact of her garment were there to plague him with a vague, undefinable uneasiness.

He got out of bed, went over to a window from which he could look out in the direction of the barn.

There was a light in the barn. For a while it was steady. Then it was moving about. Then it was steady again. Not to himself would he have admitted it, but into the bottom of his heart, like the seep of an impurity into a well, there filtered a little poison which was very much like rage. He couldn't understand why it should take such a lot of time to find a pair of hames.

Rufus had never consciously been jealous in his life. His native poise and courage, and his unspoiled faith in human nature, had kept jealousy away from him.

But this night was like no other night that he could remember. The feeling that was paramount in him now was neither anger nor jealousy so much as it was the stifling desire to have Alice there with him again. He didn't want her to be away from him. That was all.

The barn-door became a centre of animation.

Duke came out; then Andy Jones, jangling the hames over one arm; then Alice, holding the lantern high.

At the sight of Alice, Rufus went rigid. It was almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. It was almost as if he were looking at her once again across that poisonous courtyard in the Old Tenderloin.

She was wearing her lilac kimono, but it was loosely held and was fluttering open. Now, as then, her loose hair was an aureole about her head; there wasn't a curve in all her pliant length that wasn't revealed at times. She had put her bare feet into a pair of yellow slippers. At every step the ivory whiteness of her skin gleamed out—from her ankles, from her round and delicate throat, her uplifted arm.

Then, as by a gradual process, Rufus became aware that all this was likewise a spectacle for some one else.

Andy Jones was there. He walked a little back of her, a little to one side. He was all but treading on her—unconscious of his own feet, unconscious of the ground under them, unconscious of everything in the universe except this vision which filled his ogling eyes and in which he was steeping his soul. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Andy was looking at Beauty incarnate, exquisitely fashioned, perfectly clean. He was translated, like a man who has drunk deep of a heady brew.

It was just a fleeting impression.

Rufus, there at his window, controlled himself. It took something of a wrench, he couldn't have told why.

"Well," he cried, "did you get the hames?"

Andy Jones came miserably back to earth. He dropped from the zone of light. He throatily assured Rufus that he had found the hames all right. He said, "Good night, Mrs. Underwood, and much obliged," and he sang out his good night to Rufus. Then he was gone, plainly a victim of embarrassment, if not of a greater trouble.

It was different with Alice. She paused. She held the lantern a little higher still. She looked up with a smile.

"Oh, Rufus," she cried, "you should have seen the doves! They fluttered all about us in the light."

## Chapter VII

### MIDSUMMER MADNESS

YOU mustn't show yourself like that," said Rufus softly, with a quivering intensity, as he met Alice on the lower floor.

Her smile and her remark about the doves disarmed him. There was no rage in him at all.

She read his meaning. Her face went scarlet.

"Oh, Rufus!"

She looked down at herself.

"That's all right," said Rufus gently.

But there was a rigour in his arms and hands as he took the lantern. He raised the chimney—Alice watching him—and blew out the flame. The extinguished wick sent out an acrid whiff. This and even the heat of the lantern made them glad to get away.

With no other word they groped their way back to the upper floor and into the scented spaciousness of the room they had elected for their own. In the centre of the room Alice stood stock still.

"It was only Andy," she gasped.

Rufus also stood still for a moment. He was trying to organise his thought, formulate it into speech—as much for his own relief, perhaps, as for the girl's enlightenment.

"I know, I know," he said slowly, soothingly. Then, as the words rushed up: "But, Alice, you're mine! Mine!"

Rufus slept. His breathing, profound and regular, yet indistinct, was like some movement of the earth. It was almost as if the earth itself slept, here in the dark and tepid and luxurious night.

But Rufus's wife lay wide awake, open-eyed.

She had lain awake like this on other nights—many of them—back there in the furnished apartment of Mrs. Moss's establishment. She recalled these nights now, detail after detail. It seemed to her that there had been no change.

She was Viola Swan.

She could see it now—all her thoughts and hopes about it being otherwise were mere delusions.

Jessie Schofield was right. Jessie had been right from the very first moment, had seen her as she was, had recognised the truth. Jessie had never faltered in her perceptions since then.

She recalled the way that the girl was perpetually clinging about her, her unceasing interest in the garments which had been part of the equipment for the battle of life as fought in the Old Tenderloin—the little pink corsets, the silk stockings, the cheap but pretty finery of machine-embroidered cottons, that ineffaceable taint of synthetic perfumes.

“Didn't men ever tell you you were beautiful?”

“Did any one ever follow you home?”

“What do you do to become a siren?”

“What is a 'Palace of Sin'?”

Why should Jessie keep on asking her questions like these, every time that they were alone together, if she didn't suspect, didn't know?

But Jessie had merely developed a little more highly the same intuition that brought the men to flocking about the place. That also she could see now in the

clairvoyance of the night. It made her shudder. Yet, at the same time, it made her marvel—with a thrill which was odd and not wholly unpleasant.

She hadn't understood. She had nourished some sort of an idea that they were there to see Rufus, that they were merely interested in his welfare, interested in her on his account.

With a mental gasp she recognised how absurd this was.

It was she herself who was the lure.

This night had brought its revelation. She saw again the doting, hungry eyes of Andy Jones; his gaping mouth; his Adam's-apple as he swallowed; his awkward and trembling hands. She heard in memory his stifled efforts to laugh; felt the heat and magnetism of his not too ungainly body as he moved about her out there in the barn. And it seemed to her now that she had enjoyed it all.

It was this that sent the thrill and trepidation from her heart out to brain and arms and legs.

She had been Viola Swan and had not suspected it. She saw that she had been nothing else all along, that what she had been this night for Andy Jones she had been ever since her arrival in Rising Sun for other men as well.

Was she anything else for Rufus even? A little while ago he had crushed her to him.

She heard the echo of his voice:

"Mine! *Mine!*"

It was not precisely dismay which came to little Mrs. Underwood as she lay there rigidly still with her eyes open to the darkness. There was bafflement. But there was also some anger, a feeling that was almost joy, sin-

ister and fierce, in the sense of power which Viola Swan could exert in a community like this.

But the idea, taking this shape, merely served to recall again the pitiful hopes and expectations with which she had sought to drug herself during the first weeks of her nightmarish existence in Mrs. Moss's place.

"I'm not Viola Swan," she whispered, "I'm Alice Linn. I'm Mrs. Rufus Underwood. Oh, Lord, Lord! Tell me that I am."

She stole quietly out of the bed and crept over to the open window. Kneeling there, she raised her face to the slowly billowing fragrance. A rooster crowed. As if this were the signal for which they had waited, a million crickets struck into the music of their kind, lulling, strongly cadenced. Then a whippoorwill began to sing there in the shadows of the honeysuckle right under the window.

She knew the bird, loved it. The song of it—insistent, quick, cheerful, familiar, coming to her at just that particular moment—soothed her, encouraged her.

The morning ripened, sweet and breathless. Rufus had been gone a couple of hours to get in his clover. Everything was very still.

It may have been a quality of the heavy and fragrant atmosphere, of the silence, and also of the comparative coolness and duskiness of the interior of the house, but as Rufus's wife moved here and there about her occupations, with the memory of last night's experiences still strong upon her, the spectre of Viola Swan had no terrors for her at all.

The house was like a cave. She was the primitive woman. All men were primitive men.

She heard the beating of Duke's heavy tail on the

boards of the back porch. There came a soft footfall, a clank of steel. Some one cleared his throat. It was Andy Jones coming back with the borrowed hames.

Alice paused where she was. For a moment she held her breath. What she asked herself was this:

Was it true that Andy looked upon her not as Mrs. Rufus Underwood but as Viola Swan?

It was a wicked thought, subtle, alluring.

“Hello, Andy!” she cried, a little short of breath as a result of her thought. “Is that you? Come right in.”

Andy stepped into sight, peering, a prey to doubt. From her very first glance at him she knew that there was no mistake now in the way that Rufus had instinctively translated the events of the preceding evening. As plainly as if they had been recorded there on a photographic plate, there were visible in Andy’s countenance the visions with which he had regaled his eyes while here before, also his hope of seeing them again.

“I—I thought I’d run in with the hames,” he said lamely, with his eyes on the girl who was still Viola Swan and couldn’t help it.

He saw the small head framed with its black billow of hair; the strong but delicate face, with its expanding nostrils, its red and smiling mouth; and, dominating all this, a pair of eyes that were lustrous, deep, inscrutable.

All this in a place like a secret cave, safe from the glare and publicity of the summer morning.

## Chapter VIII

### A CROCK OF CREAM

**W**ON'T you sit down a while?" she asked.

It was odd. She sensed the danger, and yet, somehow, she couldn't quite bring herself to forego it.

"Why," Andy faltered; "I wasn't in any particular rush."

He cast his eyes about him as if looking for a place to deposit the hames, or a place to sit down—as if he weren't quite sure which.

"I'll take them," she said as she approached him with her hand out.

She was wearing one of those blouses of hers, clean and sheer, with the throat open, with brief, wide sleeves which revealed the slender yet strong and shapely whiteness of her upper arms.

What followed came without any immediate warning. The warnings in nature are apt to be slow and cumulative, easy to disregard.

There was a clank of steel as the hames fell to the floor. Andy had let them fall, like something forgotten.

For a moment his two hands were out, tense, yet inspired with all the gentleness in the world. His ordinarily innocuous eyes were blazing, but the flame in them was a plea for compassion. His usually insignificant face had become the mask of a great tragedian.

So it seemed to Viola Swan.

His movements appeared to her to have been slow.

As a matter of fact, they must have been swift. There was no perceptible interval between the time that he had caught her bare arms in the grip of his implacable hands, then held her imprisoned, helpless, against his breast.

"Andy," she whispered tempestuously. "Don't! What do you mean?"

"I love you," he faltered.

There was no faltering of his hands and arms though. They were as rigid as steel.

"Since when?" she panted.

"I don't know," he responded miserably. "I guess it was always." He took thought. He was trying to be honest. "I guess it was since last night."

"Let me go!"

"I want you. I couldn't sleep all night. I guess I'm going crazy."

It was almost a sob. It was certainly a supplication. There was a vibration of conscience in it almost as pronounced as that of passion. Andy wasn't merely wearing the mask of tragedy. He was tragedy itself.

"This is dangerous," she warned.

Like any woman under such circumstances, she was doing the thinking for both of them. She was able to think, as the first excitement ebbed quickly away from her.

It would never do to struggle. That would merely render the poor, daft creature furious, drive him on to desperation. It wouldn't do to cry out. The very worst that might happen to any of them, or to all of them, would follow if she apprised Rufus of what was going on.

"Andy," she whispered gently.

She put up her hand and stroked his face. It was like

that she had first managed to slip the headstall onto the fear-maddened young horse she had tamed.

"Let me go," she whispered, more softly still.

She was watching with every nerve of her body for a relaxing of the tense arms that locked her shoulders. But her eyes brought her the first news of her victory. She saw the fire go dim in Andy's own eyes, the strained lines of his face soften somewhat. She caressed his cheek with her finger-tips. His arms suddenly fell away from her. She was free.

Andy stood right where he was, even after she had picked up the fallen hames and moved away from him. He was like a man who has absorbed too much liquor or who suffers from an obsession.

"I didn't mean to do it," he suddenly blurted. "I didn't mean to do it."

"I know you didn't," she answered.

She was amazingly calm. It was amazing to herself. Her thoughts were clear. About this man who stood in front of her, she was thinking scarcely at all. It was about herself she thought. She surveyed the night; reviewed her mental processes immediately preceding this outbreak.

A voice inside her brain—yet like the voice of some one who recognised her and called to her from a distance—was hailing her over and over again as Viola Swan.

"Viola Swan! Oh, Viola Swan!"

She tried to deafen her mental hearing to it. The voice persisted all the same.

"What shall I do?" asked Andy.

"You'd better go," she suggested gently. She felt sorry for him.

"You'll never forgive me," he declared, lost.

"I'll forgive you, and do forgive you," she said, holding out her hand. "We'll both forget about it, never think about it again."

Andy gazed at her hand this time with a species of wonderment, as if it were the first hand he had ever seen in all his life. His action now was as unexpected as it had been before.

With a gasping, inarticulate exclamation, he took her hand in both his own. Before she could stop him he had shambled down to his knees. He pressed her hand to his face. He wept over it and held it against his convulsive lips.

There's no telling how long this second scene of their little drama might have lasted—nor how it might have ended; but just then there came the repeated honk of an automobile-horn, followed by the crescendo creep and purr of the machine itself. It was enough to galvanise even Andy Jones out of his trance, to bring Mrs. Underwood herself to the open door with a rush.

Up the private roadway from the public pike an extremely large and powerful yellow touring-car was making its way with a single occupant.

The car swept up to the side of the house with the speed of a locomotive.

The driver got down.

He was a man of thirty, perhaps. He had that peculiar arrogance which goes with certain persons who ride powerful machines or fine horses—the look which seems to say:

"I made this machine—or created this horse—all by myself."

He was down from the machine and had turned completely to the door before he saw the lady of the house. The sight of the girl standing there in the door obvi-

ously gave him a decided shock, as pleasant as it was severe. He could scarcely be blamed for that. Excitement had made her eyes more brilliant than ever, heightened the contrast of the pallors and pinks of her complexion, parted her red lips, quickened her breathing.

The driver of the yellow car pulled off his thin silk cap. He had only a glance for the growling hound. His eyes came back to the vision in the door.

"Does he bite?" he asked with easy familiarity.

Alice cast down her eyes. She spoke a few soft words to Duke which brought the hound, still grumbling, but obedient, curling to her feet. She looked up again, with one of those startled looks of hers, slightly abashed.

The stranger was still smiling at her.

"Could you favour me with some water?" he asked. "Not for myself," he added, with a chuckle as if to imply a joke. "It's for my machine, you know."

"Certainly," Alice answered, unsmiling, glad to escape the direct fire of his gaze.

The stranger insisted on helping her to draw a bucket of water from the well. His hand touched hers. He looked at her obliquely, when he wasn't looking at her openly, always with an undisguised admiration and a lurking familiarity.

While they were still at the well Andy Jones took his departure. He passed them almost slinkingly, disappearing in the direction of the barn. Alice and the stranger were alone. The stranger seemed to be quite as fully aware of this as Alice herself. She could see that he was distraught as he went about what he had to do, so she went into the house, out of sight.

She heard him turn his machine around, taking his time about it. There followed a period of silence. Then

Duke growled again. The stranger called to her. He had approached as close as he dared to the kitchen door.

"I say, could I have a glass of milk?"

Alice recognised the request for what it was—a mere excuse for delay, a ruse to see her again. But she also recognised the truth that it was the *Viola Swan* part of her that was aware of this. It wasn't Alice Linn—it wasn't Mrs. Rufus Underwood—who understood men like that. Meekly, she seized a clean glass from the cupboard shelf and hastened out.

There was a sort of detached cellar or spring-house around at one side of the kitchen.

"I'll get you some," she said hastily, as she passed the stranger, scarcely daring to glance at him.

She was aware that he was following her, but she gave no hint of what was in her heart, and throwing open the spring-house door, entered. The stranger was just back of her.

"Wait," she murmured; "I shan't be but a moment."

But the stranger appeared to be in the grip of a rising enthusiasm.

"A spring-house!" he exclaimed jovially. "And, oh, see the crock of cream! Let me drink from it. Do!"

He had followed her into the place.

Alice turned slightly, at a loss as to what either to do or to say. The stress of her recent scene with Andy Jones was still sore within her. She had an impression of the stranger leaning toward her, and she was increasingly nervous.

Suddenly, she was aware that he was whispering to her, and what he said came as a sort of confirmation of her own innermost thoughts. That was the harrowing part of it.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" he asked.  
"You don't belong on a farm."

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "I don't understand."

But she understood all right. It wasn't to Mrs. Rufus Underwood that this man spoke. It was to Viola Swan. Everything declared the truth, blared it at her through psychic megaphones—his accent, his quickened breath, his furtive eyes, his sagging lower lip. So men had looked at Viola Swan before. So they would always look.

A wave of misery submerged her, brief but violent. She bore up under it and figuratively sought to catch her breath again. This was a nightmare. She wouldn't give way to it. She was Alice Linn—Mrs. Rufus Underwood. But no, the man kept on speaking to Viola Swan

"Don't understand!" he ejaculated with a broken laugh. "No, I suppose not! I suppose you never look at yourself in the mirror. You're no girl for a place like this. You're wasting yourself out here. New York's the place for you. Broadway would come across with anything it's got for a little girl like you. I'm merely giving you a friendly tip."

His last sentence may have been inspired by some hint of caution. The girl had picked up the crock of cream, seemed to be undecided what to do with it, which way to turn, what to say.

"Don't!" she said finally, but with an air of weakness; then hurried on, as if speaking to herself: "My husband—"

"Husband!"

There was a definite sneer in the way he pronounced the word. It must have been the sight of Andy Jones

sneaking off that was still in his mind. He put out his hand to touch her shoulder.

Before he could touch her she turned. Even then, possibly, she had no idea as to what she was going to do; but, at the sight of that leering face, it was as if she were confronted in the flesh by all that horrified and sickened her, all that was bent on perpetuating the thrall-dom from which she was seeking to escape. Her fingers tightened convulsively on the crock. The crock became a weapon of defence. She struck at her nightmare with it, struck at the face which leered—and had always leered—at Viola Swan.

The cream splashed. She heard the stranger's bleat of surprise and rage and pain.

But these were sensations which came to her vaguely. The one sharp sensation which came to her was the thrill of fearful joy with which she felt the heavy earthen-ware vessel take contact with the stranger's flesh.

At last, at last!

She had her nightmare where she could punish it, hammer it, smash it, kill it perhaps. Her rage ran through all her veins like a red hot venom.

She struck again, then again.

The first blow must have blinded the stranger somewhat. He was floundering about, incoherent both as to voice and movement. There was cream all over him. Through this there appeared a flash of crimson which spread and spread.

It all transpired in a whirlwind of passion which required but a dozen seconds.

Then the stranger had found his way to the open air. Before he could escape altogether, however, the girl who was fighting not a man but an army of spectres, hurled the crock against the side of his head, sent him reeling

out into the open air. He staggered there for a moment or two longer—groping and blinded, making futile efforts to wipe the cream and blood from his face.

He saw his automobile standing over there conveniently headed for the open road, the road of escape from something which even yet he could not by any possibility understand. He fled.

Left alone on the scene of her battle Alice Underwood stood there for a space as if she herself had been badly wounded. She was paralysed, with a paralysis that stopped her breathing, numbed her thought. It was only gradually that her breathing came back to her—in dry convulsive sobs.

Would it always be like this?

She shrank down where she was and covered her face with her hands.

## Chapter IX

### HAIRCLOTH AND GHOSTS

JESSIE SCHOFIELD'S grandmother was about the most respectable person in Rising Sun, where every one was respectable.

Jenvey was her name—Mrs. Alma Jenvey. She was considered well-to-do, and lived in an extremely neat and rather pretentious frame house in the outskirts of the village. There were a well-kept lawn, trim beds of geraniums, petunias, and phlox; a number of fruit-trees in the yard, and these had their trunks neatly whitewashed.

Every afternoon at three o'clock, weather permitting, Mrs. Jenvey appeared on her front porch, slender, tranquil, dressed in sober silk—long sleeves and high neck relieved by a ruche or a bit of lace—and composed herself to her knitting or embroidery.

She was never long alone at such times. Generally some other lady dropped in—although there weren't so many of them in Rising Sun who considered themselves Mrs. Jenvey's social equals. Sometimes it was the pastor.

This particular afternoon it was Joel Kennedy, Rufus Underwood's uncle.

Uncle Joel drove up behind his favourite roadster, a big-boned, smooth-coated sorrel, young but gentle. He took his time about hitching his horse, as was his won't, gave an extra jerk at the strap to see that all was solid, came slowly up the path, with a glance for the grass and

flowers, but none for Mrs. Jenvey herself until he was mounting the steps.

Mrs. Jenvey, who wasn't much more than fifty and must have been pretty in her day, had watched his arrival with a certain nervousness. She delivered herself of a quick little flutter to rearrange the draperies of her brown silk dress. As her caller came up onto the porch she delivered herself of another little flutter to denote surprise.

"Why, Joel Kennedy!"

Uncle Joel lowered himself into a rocking-chair with a sigh before he answered.

"Hello, Alma!"

"I declare, you're such a stranger I hardly recognised you," Mrs. Jenvey went on reprovingly. "How is Mary, and Aunt Allie, and everybody?"

"They're well," Uncle Joel exploded, with his eyes on the floor of the porch.

Mrs. Jenvey shot him a quick glance of her malicious black eyes and smirked.

"I haven't seen anything of Rufus, either, since his return from New York. Jessie told me first about his coming, about his having brought a wife back with him. Everybody seems to be agreed that she's a pretty little thing."

Uncle Joel didn't answer. Mrs. Jenvey decided to prod him a bit. She meditated her attack as she slowly rocked and made a pretense of going on with her embroidery.

"That must have been quite an exciting time they had over there the other day," she mused.

With one of his convulsive movements Uncle Joel now threw himself back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. He remained that way, motionless, thoughtful.

"As to that," he said, "I could tell you better if I knew what you was talkin' about."

Mrs. Jenvey tittered.

"You're the same old tease that you always were, Joel. If you don't know what I'm talking about I guess that you're the only one in this part of Chenango County who doesn't. They say that Rufus's wife just gave that fellow a laying out."

"Oh, you mean that!" exploded Uncle Joel, collapsing into a normal position.

"They say that fellow just left a river of cream and blood behind him right on into Bainbridge—cream getting less and the blood getting thicker. They say that Dr. Murdock had to take six stitches in his scalp. I can't say that I blame the poor little thing. At the same time——" this was the prod she had been leading up to—— "I'm sorry that Rufus married one of these chicks who encourage bad men."

Uncle Joel neither moved nor spoke for a dozen seconds. Then he slowly turned. But it wasn't at Mrs. Jenvey he looked even then. It was at the chair on which reposed Mrs. Jenvey's work-basket. Manifestly it was a parlour-chair. It was ancient and stiff, upholstered in black hair-cloth. Uncle Joel looked at this chair as if that had been the subject of their conversation. He droned through his nose.

"What makes you think she encouraged him?"

"A man must have some encouragement," said Mrs. Jenvey, "however depraved."

"I suppose so," Uncle Joel roared wearily. "And I suppose you ladies here in Risin' Sun have to have some victim for to feed your gossip on."

He put a period to this explosion with a twinkling smile.

"Nobody could ever accuse me of gossiping," retorted Mrs. Jenvey complacently, with a dash of vinegar, however. "I'm merely telling you, Joel, the things I hear; and I'm not telling you the half of them either. It ain't gossip to say that there must be some reason why all the men of Rising Sun have taken to running out to Rufus Underwood's place every chance they get. What are you staring at that chair for?"

Joel Kennedy didn't answer her question. He raised his chin, squinted out into space.

"You're right," he said; "there generally is a reason when men go galavantin' around some woman. The reason generally is, it's because they're a passel of fools."

"Or the woman giving them encouragement," Mrs. Jenvey supplemented primly.

"You're wrong there, Alma," Uncle Joel asserted loudly as he began to rock himself with violence. "Laws! If encouragement was what fetched the men around, more'n one lone gal'd make herself the centre of a camp-meetin'."

"You don't seem to have a very high opinion of us ladies of Rising Sun," said Mrs. Jenvey loftily from the heights of her respectability.

Joel Kennedy stopped rocking as abruptly as he had begun. One would have thought that he had just discovered an aeroplane, or a new kind of bird, over there beyond the tops of the maple-trees which lined the road. It was several seconds before he spoke. There was an accent of gentle reverence in his voice.

"The ladies! Why, Alma, if I was the Lord I'd just give each and every one of them a golden crown—as I reckon He will do, all in good time. You see, I can't forget that they was all gals once—tender little things, sort of gropin' around, like blind puppies, without any

teeth, thinkin' that there wasn't much else in the world but love and frolic. Should we hold it up against them if some of them get tromped on, or get a little scalded, or swaller somethin' that wasn't good for their insides? Eh—God bless me!"

Uncle Joel once more slowly turned and looked at the hair-cloth chair—keenly, with a certain disapproval.

"Joel," Mrs. Jenvey asked, "what ails you anyway?"  
"Me?"

Joel gave a little start, as one might who is suddenly awakened from a brown-study.

"I asked you once before why you look at that chair like that. I declare, you make me nervous. Any one would think that you were looking at a ghost."

Uncle Joel met Mrs. Jenvey's eyes squarely now. His voice was slow and steady.

"Well, now, you've just about struck it," he said. "You know, I can't see that there chair without sort of remembering how Leslie Shaine slipped off of it one evenin' when we were both courtin' you. Do you remember?"

It was Mrs. Jenvey's turn to rock. She rocked slowly, with her attention suddenly riveted on her fancy work. There was a frozen look in her face. Joel Kennedy watched her.

"Poor Leslie's been dead nigh onto thirty years," she murmured at last with forced complacency.

"Remember it just like it was yesterday," said Uncle Joel, almost stealthily. "Coroner's jury brought in a verdict of accidental shootin'." He relaxed. "Handsome boy with his blue eyes and curly hair!" He stretched his legs, took a quick glance at the sky. "Don't look as if we were goin' to get that rain," he speculated.

He got up. Mrs. Jenvey had an involuntary movement of relief. She addressed him hastily.

"Ask Mary to come in and see me one of these days."

"Oh, by the way," said Uncle Joel; "Mary was just back from visitin' Rufus's wife, when I was leavin' to drive in. She says that Rufus's wife's been a trifle lonely—especially since Jessie stopped comin' out. Jessie and Alice—that's Rufus's wife—were sort of fond of each other. I thought I might drive Jessie out there and let her visit for a few days. I am headed past Rufus's place now."

Mrs. Jenvey's mouth was prim. She cast a quick glance at Joel Kennedy. He was gazing curiously at the hair-cloth chair again. Mrs. Jenvey's eyes came back to her work. She jabbed a couple of stitches into her work.

It was on her lips to defend herself for having forbidden Jessie to frequent the strange Mrs. Underwood's society. She had no blood relationship with the Underwood clan. But Joel Kennedy had just strangely touched upon a certain episode of her own youth. She was disquieted.

"I guess you can take Jessie along," she said; "so far as I am concerned."

## Chapter X

### AS BETWEEN NEIGHBOURS

JESSIE'S got her grandmother to let her stay with us right along," said Rufus as he squatted on his heels and reached for a straw.

Both Rufus and Uncle Joel had driven their folks in for the Sunday evening service, but neither of them had entered the place of worship. The summer night was thickening about them. The Gothic windows of the little wooden church were open. From these poured a faint shimmer of yellow light and a rustle of subdued activity.

Uncle Joel turned a feed-box onto its side, seated himself, gazed at the nearest window of the church.

"I reckon that'll suit Alice," he said. "How does she appear to be feelin'?"

Rufus meditated before he answered.

"Fine! Fine!"

From the lamp-lit windows there came the plaintive, scrawny bleat of a small organ. Like a line drawn through grass-grown water this accumulated a gradual weight of trailing voices—women's voices, principally—as the congregation essayed the opening hymn.

"Is that Andy Jones singing tenor?" asked Rufus.

"Yes," Uncle Joel answered. "I can see him from here—standin' there beside Alice and Jessie. Rufus, Alice sure has had a lot of influence on Andy. You know the sort of fellow he was before she come here—sort of wild—good-natured, you know—but harum-scarum."

Rufus didn't answer except to chew meditatively on his straw. But there gradually appeared a rapt expression on his face as, more and more, another voice than that of Andy Jones detached itself from the chorus—a woman's voice—a warm and true but uncultivated soprano—his wife's!

"Some folks around Rising Sun seemed to be sort of scared of her at first," Rufus said with amused contempt.

The organ was bleating its interlude.

"Folks are like live stock," Uncle Joel answered slowly. "They got to get used to you before they'll come up and eat out of your hand—however good you be."

The music, fortified, swung heavily into the second verse.

"Some of the folks in there right now are no better than they ought to be," Rufus opined with a note of challenge. "There's Jessie's grandmother. Just because she married old Curtis Jenvey she puts on airs. Why, dog-gone it! I can remember the way she treated Jessie's mother—her own flesh and blood—for getting into trouble."

"Like live stock," Uncle Joel ruminated softly as the hymn ended, and a comparative silence ensued; "and I reckon, Rufus, that Alice will end up by tamin' the folks of Risin' Sun just about like she's tamed the critters on the farm—includin' Andy Jones."

"And including a lot of others," Rufus replied with slow tranquillity. "There never were so many folks coming around to the old place—leastwise, not so far back as I can remember—especially men folks. You wouldn't find any of them trying—trying to get gay like that chap from the city. Uncle Joel—I say it right here by the

church! If I'd caught that fellow I'd have killed him dead."

"She seems to have taken care of herself all right as it was," said Uncle Joel cautiously.

"She smashed him," Rufus agreed; "but it broke her all up. She was crying her heart out when I found her. I'd just come in to fill my water-jug. If I'd 'a' got there a minute sooner I'd 'a' been there in time to catch him myself. Then the folks of Rising Sun would have had something to talk about."

"I guess they ain't doin' so much talkin'," Uncle Joel consoled.

"Not in your hearing, nor mine," Rufus answered; "but they're talking, all right. I can tell. So can she. Anyway, Sally Weaver hears enough."

"Sally's workin' for you steady now?"

"Steady's her old man will let her. He makes her come home every now and then to cook and wash for that new wife of his."

"Just like live stock," Uncle Joel commented again. "And, at that, I guess that the Weavers are just about as good as the next ones. Rufe, a certain lady in this here community got me to subscribe for a book for her once. That was a good many years ago, and I was young myself. So was she. The name of that book was 'Metropolitan Life Unveiled, or the Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities.'

"It wasn't no fit book for young folks—nor old ones either, I guess. It told some pretty tall stories as to what goes on in places like New York and Chicago and San Francisco. But—bless me! Do you know I've often thought since that there ain't any great difference in human nature after all? Every one of those stories could

be matched by things that have happened right here in Risin' Sun—things just as bad, or worse."

Inside the church the preacher was getting into his stride. His voice rose to declamatory thunder:

"Cast the first stone, you that are sinless! That's it! That's what it says, and that's what it means. Look into your own hearts. See what you were thinking about—last night—or the night before. An'en, if your thoughts were pure—an'en, if you can say: 'Behold, I am whiter'n snow!—'"

There was a slight smile on Rufus's face, but, even there in the gloaming, it looked as if his face had gone a trifle whiter, was a bit set.

"Give it to 'em," said Uncle Joel. "That's the sort of stuff they need."

"I shouldn't be surprised but what the preacher's been hearing things himself," said Rufus. "Anyway, he's been out to our house to dinner a couple of times."

The preacher after his thunderous outburst had let his voice fall to a hoarse whisper, all but inaudible to those who listened outside. Then, suddenly, he broke out again louder than ever:

"Oh, yes! 'She gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' "

Again the voice subsided.

"He knows what he's talkin' about," said Uncle Joel. "And no one can say that he don't practise what he preaches. His wife—I remember her well—one of the prettiest girls she was that ever came out of Two Mile—ran away with one of these drummer-chaps when they'd only been married a couple of months. And, later, he took her back. She didn't live long after her baby was born."

"Baby still living?"

"Nobody knows. He grew up—handsome as a sun-

flower, got into trouble, skipped out." Uncle Joel combed his beard. "That's why Jessie Schofield has used her grandmother's maiden name instead of her father's. Mrs. Jenvey was a Schofield."

"Is that——"

"Yep; folks have sort of forgot about it, never mention it any more—although they did then a lot. The preacher—bless his good old soul—is Jessie's grandfather, although she don't know it—and maybe he don't either. But it's sort of touchin' when I see him and Alma Jenvey settin' together on that spick and span front porch of hers. I'm just sort of tellin' you these things, Rufe——"

"I understand," breathed Rufus. Then: "What's that?"

Both turned and gazed in the direction of the door of the church, whence there had come the signs of disturbance—a jostling of shapes, a subdued outburst of speech—which had attracted Rufus's attention.

"Looks like a shindy," said Uncle Joel.

There was always a group of half-grown boys and young men about the door of the church on Sunday night—waiting for the services to end, expectant of the girls inside.

Rufus, nimbler than Uncle Joel, had run forward to see what the trouble was. But the crowd was already moving off into the darkness before he could come up to the scene of the trouble. Only one remained of all who had been there, an anemic little boy with a large head and a precocious face. His name was Timmy Athens.

"What was the trouble, Timmy?" Rufus whispered.

Timmy looked fleetingly wretched, delicate and tactful beyond his years.

"They were talkin' about your wife," he answered. Then he fled.

## Chapter XI

WITH HORN AND HOOF

IT was as if Rufus himself had received a blow, and it gave him pause. But it didn't stagger him. The pause was only long enough for him to tell himself that this was his concern. He started off in the direction the crowd had taken.

He didn't have to go very far.

A hundred yards or less from the church was the schoolhouse, surrounded by its yard.

The crowd swung around into the yard so that the little brick building was between them and the church. The place was dark—blue darkness in the open spaces, black darkness in the shadows; but it was light enough to fight in, especially for the native-born.

There lingered in Rufus's heart still some hope that what Timmy Athens had said was not true. He knew that he was hoping against certainty, but he wouldn't give in. He was almost up to the crowd. He heard enough to tell him who the heroes were. One of them was Jeff Beeman—Cole Beeman's oldest boy—who had been among the recent visitors at Rufus's place. The other was a young farm-hand from Two Mile—Ben Clode, by name—who for many moons had been camping on the trail of Sally Weaver.

Notwithstanding this collateral evidence to the truth of what Timmy Athens had intimated, Rufus clung to his hope.

Instead of following the crowd any further, therefore, he ran about the schoolhouse in the opposite direction and came up under the shadow of it where he could see and hear unseen.

It was Jeff's voice that first arose above the murmur of the crowd. Jeff was twenty, big for his age and powerful. Ben Clode was twenty-five or twenty-six, thin, wiry, tough. The two men were facing each other, three or four feet apart. They had both already thrown aside their coats, were in the preliminary stage of battle—like two young bulls pawing up the turf.

"I said," Jeff was saying, "that if you mentioned her name I'd smash your head into jelly."

"They's a reason fer you to fight, I guess," whined Ben with nasal wickedness, "but you ain't the only one."

Neither of the two had their hands up in the ordinary attitude of boxers. Their arms were only slightly forward. Both were crouched. At the conclusion of Ben's remark Jeff sidestepped slightly, tried to grasp his antagonist, floundered a pair of blows at him.

"You think that every one's like Sally Weaver," Jeff blurted.

"Darn you," cried Ben, "I'll make you eat them words. And I'll make you say it's true—what she said—about you and Mrs.—"

They had gripped each other. For a moment or two, there was a swirling strain as they struggled for a fall. This was no affair of Queensbury rules. There were no rules. Swiftly they broke their clinch, flailed overhand blows at each other. Ben was the more agile of the two, more experienced. He ducked, thrust his head into Jeff Beeman's midriff, while Jeff pounded his back. But Ben was kicking with his knees.

Such speech as came from them now was brief, inco-

herent. It was such speech as might have come from any fighting males—the whine, the grunt, the bellow.

Rufus Underwood, standing in the blackness of the schoolhouse, still hesitated—battered as much as the combatants were, but by hands invisible. There was no longer a chance to hope. His Alice was the cause of this battle—she who, unconscious of it all, was worshipping back there in the little church, her face raised, her heart elevated, her soul soaring up on the wings of aspiration.

He could have wept.

All this was in but an instant or so of time—while the human bulls pitted against each other brute strength and brute sagacity, primitive ferocity and tension.

But the real nature of the battle wasn't lost on Rufus. Perhaps he saw it more clearly than any one else there. To them it was an ordinary struggle, the motive of which was no extraordinary one. The female of the species in one way or another generally inspired the occasional battles between the unmarried youth of the community. For the other spectators there this was merely a relative fighting for the good name of a girl who had been brought into his family-clan by marriage.

It was all different for Rufus.

Like a vision it revealed itself to him—two males fighting over a female.

The thought made him sick, but it was there.

He remembered how young Jeff Beeman had sat on the back porch of his house only yesterday and watched Alice come and go. In memory he saw the saturnine Ben Clode hanging about the kitchen door after nightfall. For Ben, Sally Weaver, the hired girl, had become but a pretence. It was upon the mistress of the house Ben had cast the eyes of his longing.

From the crowd there came a complex, savage gut-

tural of exultation as the grunting and straining champions went to earth with a soft thud and a recrudescence of articulate speech.

From Jeff: "Say 'enough,' you dirty dog!"

From Ben: "Let loose, er I'll chaw your gizzard out!"

From the crowd: "Bust him, Ben! Go it, Jeff! He's bleedin'! Stand back; give 'em room!"

Rufus took a step forward, short of breath. All the strength of a Goliath was in his frame. He lacked the impulse to use it. Mentally, he toppled. He lifted his face. There sprang from his heart the old, old cry of man—to the Invisible—for help and guidance.

"Stay where you are," came the answer in a voice inaudible save to the responsive ears of his soul. "'Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?'"

There swept over him a gust of faith.

A strange time and place for communication with his Maker; but generally strange, perhaps, are the circumstances of a man's nearest approaches to seership. The lightning flashes down in time of storm.

Rufus turned back.

As he did so he heard a muffled whine from the thick of the pack over there. It was Ben Clode's voice, and Ben was crying like a little boy.

"I said 'enough' once," he blubbered.

"Say it again," young Jeff Beeman commanded.

By village law—so Rufus reflected with a flare of thanksgiving—the honour of little Mrs. Underwood was safe.

Rufus rejoined Uncle Joel at the side of the church. The older man had waited for him there. He looked up at Rufus with an expression that meant he had already

heard about the cause of the battle—from little Timmy Athens, perhaps.

"It won't do no hurt, Rufus," he said reflectively.

"Jeff gave that Ben Clode a licking," said Rufus. "If he hadn't done it, I would 've."

For a long time neither of them spoke again. The yellow light—like the voice of the preacher—struggled through the Gothic windows of the wooden church; both light and voice to be swallowed up, symbolically, one might have said, by the vast, inexplicable, mysterious night.

The closing hymn was sung. The preacher spoke the benediction. There was a movement inside the church as the congregation prepared to leave.

"Yea, Lord," murmured Uncle Joel; "just like live stock, but live stock who do take thought of Thee now and then!"

## Chapter XII

### THE RED ECLIPSE

MRS. UNDERWOOD, wondering what her young friend, Jessie Schofield, was about, ran up the stairs of the old farmhouse to the second floor. There were two or three levels to the second story—a step up here, two steps up there. There was a small upper hall at the head of the stairs, perennially dark and cool, from which the doors opened into the various rooms.

She paused there. The door of her own room was open. Through it she could see Mrs. Jenvey's granddaughter.

Mrs. Underwood gave a little gasp.

It was as if there in the cool twilight of the upper hall she had been confronted by a ghost. But this ghost was a ghost of flesh and blood. It was the ghost of Viola Swan.

Jessie had evidently unearthed the grass-woven suitcase which was all the baggage brought with her by Rufus Underwood's bride on her flight from New York. In it at the time were the remnants of that wardrobe with which she had outfitted herself in the Old Tenderloin.

There were a pair of French-heeled shoes—scarcely worn because they had never been comfortable. There were worn silk stockings of various shades. The grey and the black stockings were all right for wear in Rising Sun, but not the pinks and the purples.

These the bride had kept hidden in the grass-woven suit-case. Hidden there also had been a filmy red dressing-sack, among other things; and a little old make-up box, which had been presented to her by Mrs. Moss, who had probably salved it from the wreckage left by some former tenant.

Perhaps Mrs. Underwood would have been unable herself to tell just why she had kept these things.

It might have been just the perversity which makes most people cling to something or other which they would be better off without.

There was another reason why she may have clung to these last relics of her avatar as Viola Swan. The reason was sentimental.

Viola Swan had a fairly large wardrobe when she first became acquainted with Rufus Underwood. A good deal of this wardrobe had been bought at the instigation and under the guidance of the crafty Mrs. Moss herself.

"A girl's got to respect herself! You got to spend money to make money in this town!"

But during the slow days—and nights—that Rufus lay sick, the volunteer nurse had made trip after trip to the pawn-shop.

Mrs. Underwood remembered it all as she stood there, transfixed and tremulous. She had never been able to carry much to the pawn-shop for fear that Mrs. Moss would see her. It took many trips before there was enough money to pay the extra physician. And each trip had been a species of glorification—a sort of purification by sacrifice!

Jessie had decked herself out in a fashion unique—the high-heeled shoes, red silk stockings, a nondescript garment of frills and lace—fluffy and clean, but from the

devil's own lingerie shop; and then that spectacular, gorgeous dressing-sack—scarlet, as scarlet as Sin!

The day that Alice Linn, of Clear Spring, Maryland, bought that dressing-sack—she remembered it now—Alice Linn went into eclipse behind Viola Swan.

Jessie, thus equipped in what, after a manner of speaking, was the uniform of Viola Swan, had brought out the make-up box.

There was a rather large mirror in the room—part of an old-fashioned dresser. Before this Jessie was trying to make herself more beautiful than nature intended.

She had evidently already spent quite a little time on her tawny hair. It was combed out until the usually clinging tresses of it were floating free, strand by strand. Over her right ear was an exaggerated knot of scarlet ribbon.

She covered her face freely with powder, found a red lip-stick and proceeded to colour up not only her lips but her cheeks. Then she drew back and smiled at herself.

The original Viola Swan, standing out there on the landing, was unable to move, unable to make up her mind what to do—to sneak back the way she had come or to go on in. She would have gone away and left Jessie to amuse herself. But she was held enthralled.

It was a dreadful thrall. To her it seemed dreadful—made up of a thousand shreds of remembered revolts, violences, despairs, fears, hopes, illusions, and disillusionments. She would have gone in, only she was afraid that if she did so there would spring from her breast some revelation of the things that were clamouring there to be heard.

All she could do for the moment was to stand there and watch.

Jessie, finally deciding that she had not as yet solved the entire problem of feminine beauty, now proceeded to pencil her eyes and eyebrows—slowly and carefully; with, one would have sworn, some natural instinct to the use of such devices.

Her yellowish hair and hazel eyes made the result all the more striking by the time that her eyebrows were blackened. She lengthened the line of her eyes. In a flutter of delight she added a beauty-spot, high up on the angle of her left cheek—where no courtezan of old Versailles could have placed it better.

The ghost was perfect.

As Alice Underwood stood there and watched—breathing hard, lips parted, one hand on her breast and the other clinging to the slender old banister-rail of the stairs—she was again overswept by the haunting sensation that Viola Swan would never disappear whatever she might do.

Back there in New York—baffled, desperate, knowing not which way to turn, finally misled by old Mrs. Moss—she had called into existence this other personality of hers. It was to have been her Aladdin's jinnee of the lamp. She had called the jinnee Viola Swan. She had sought to dismiss it—had laboured to dismiss it. Since coming to Rising Sun she had consecrated her life to getting rid of it.

Was it all to be of no use?

The very first day when Jessie Schofield spoke to her she had heard the whisper of the jinnee's voice.

The men of Rising Sun knew of its presence and were lured by it. Why otherwise should they flock around the place, to stare in secret, think thoughts that Andy Jones alone of all the number had been weak enough to express?

It wasn't Alice Linn, the wife of Rufus Underwood, who troubled their peace, quickened their cravings. It was Viola Swan who did that.

The man whose blood she had shed out there on the sill of the spring-house had not made his advances to the woman of the farm. It was to Viola Swan—the former tenant of Mrs. Moss's furnished apartment, the little lost siren of the Old Tenderloin—she who had brought the historic taint along with her in spite of the wedding ceremony in City Hall; in spite of the pure air and hard work of this valley of remote Chenango County; in spite of all her thoughts and aspirations while she was alone, while she dreamed awake at her husband's side, or while she listened to the preacher in the little wooden church.

The sight of the red dressing-sack momentarily shut out everything else in her range of vision and absorbed all her senses.

It became as a flag; not only a flag, but the flag of an empire she had deserted. She had hated and dreaded this empire while she was marching in its ranks. But now, with a sense of wonder and guilty longing, she knew that she was homesick for it.

No sooner had she admitted this fact than she sought to repress it, drive it from her.

It was Viola Swan—her other self—asking her to return, to make her live again, to undertake the old campaign for riches, power, material joy. The red flag beckoned. It whispered to her:

“Viola! Viola!”

Her perceptions snapped back to normal.

It was Jessie Schofield who had whispered her name. Jessie had seen her through the open door, had danced toward her in an access of delight.

## Chapter XIII

### AS TO "MYSTERIES AND MISERIES"

**W**HAT have you been doing?" Alice asked, at a loss for anything better to say.

"How do I look?" Jessie asked in turn.

She had seized Alice by the hand, dragged her into the room, slammed the door, released her in order to strut and pose and execute a few extemporaneous dance-steps.

"Terrible," Alice answered impulsively. She was unable, though, to suppress the smile.

It was Mrs. Rufus Underwood who spoke the word. It was Viola Swan who smiled. Rufus Underwood's wife was panting to express warning and condemnation. Viola Swan was equally eager to express something entirely different—to enter into the game, make sagacious suggestions, bespeak enthusiasm, recall past experiences.

"Let me fix you up," Jessie proposed.

"No! No!"

"You'd be so beautiful!"

"Jessie! Take off those things. Wash your face."

"No wonder Rufus fell in love with you," Jessie cried, looking at herself in the mirror. "You're beautiful, anyway; but, fixed up like this—oh, I can just see you! It must be wonderful to be a siren—have every one raving about you!"

Alice sank into a chair, stared at the girl and let her talk.

"My grandmother uses powder," Jessie went on, "but she's never let me use any of it. I used to put some on when I was by myself, just to try the effect. But she never had any of this glorious rouge, and I never would have believed I could be so striking with my eyes darkened."

"You've put on too much," Viola Swan spoke up.

Alice Underwood, seated in her chair, heard the voice and scarcely recognised it as her own.

"Wouldn't I make a killing, if some of the boys of Rising Sun could see me like this?" Jessie pursued. "But what's the use? There isn't one of them worth going after. There isn't even a statesman or an old millionaire—except Judge Aspinwall, over in Bainbridge—and they say he's blind. New York's the place, or Chicago! That's what the author of 'Mysteries and Miseries' says. You ought to read what he says about 'beautiful and ambitious denizens of the demimonde!'"

Jessie flung herself down on the floor at little Mrs. Underwood's side, flung her arms over the other's knees, looked up into her face.

The girl who had been Viola Swan caressed Jessie's floating hair and flashed her dark eyes out of the open window as if she had seen something out there to startle her. She was going to say something, but checked herself. Her eyes came back to the girl looking up at her.

Jessie smiled.

"When you look like that—as you did just now," said Jessie softly and hurriedly, "you seem to think—oh! such unutterable things. I'm sure that you do, Viola, dear. Don't you remember how, that first day when I asked you what your name was, you told me that it was Viola?"

Jessie put up her hand, drew the other's head coaxingly within kissing distance.

"I know that you told me not to call you by that name," she hurried on; "but you don't mind—do you, just this once? You're not mad at me, are you? because I found these old things. Oh—listen, Viola! I was perfectly sure that there was some delicious mystery connected with you from the very first moment that I set eyes on you. Tell me about it! Go on! Don't tell me that it isn't so."

"No mystery," Alice Underwood struggled into speech. "But misery, yes!"

"The two so often go together!"

Jessie spoke spontaneously, as girls will—out of the accumulated knowledge garnered from books.

Alice Underwood smiled. Again she gave a quick glance away into the distance, but she was less haunted than she had been. It was as if her mere mention of the name of misery had been sufficient to break something of the spell of Viola Swan. It was back upon her again—the memory of the misery which had been Viola Swan's portion during that brief career of hers in New York.

"There is no mystery, Jessie," she asserted again with an impulsive earnestness which was little sister to a sob. "The things you're thinking about are misery—misery! Misery! Do you understand?"

"Tell me about them," Jessie pleaded with quickened breath. "I should love to know."

"There's nothing that I can tell you that every one doesn't know," Alice Underwood replied. "I lived in New York. I was poor. I learned enough to know that good people there are the same as good people here—or anywhere; the bad the same as the bad. You're speaking about sin. And I tell you that where there's sin there is misery—whether it's New York or Rising Sun. Jessie,

take off those wretched things; wash off that powder and paint. Come on! I'll help you."

But Jessie didn't move. She was clinging, insistent.

"They were yours," she urged. "If you don't want them let me have them. I might want to use them some day just as you did."

"Don't say such things! What do you mean?"

"You did use them. You've always got the same sort of perfume about you. I love it. I love you. Tell me! Were you an actress? Or, did you—?"

There was a delicacy about the shading off of Jessie Schofield's voice which matched the pleading affection in her wide-pupiled eyes. After all, the two girls were nearly of the same age. It was as if Jessie, having seen the fleeting incarnation of Viola Swan, was exerting everything she had of will and persuasion to call that incarnation back.

Alice Underwood resisted the effort with a tiny shudder.

In her heart she was repeating over and over to herself the formula:

"I am not Viola Swan. I am Alice Linn. I am the wife of Rufus Underwood. I am as my mother was before me. As my mother did I also shall live, decent and respected."

What she said out loud—not very loud—was:

"There was another girl in New York—a girl I was very sorry for—who owned these things. Her name was Viola. She lived in the same house with me."

"Tell me about her."

"She came from the country—tried to find work—couldn't find any. She suffered a lot."

"And had adventure," Jessie suggested, avid.

"I suppose that you would call them that," Alice went

on reluctantly. "She wasn't bad. She didn't want to be bad. She did her best to do what was right. I know she did. I know all that she went through. I know what it cost her. I know her terrors and revulsions. I know how she lay awake at night—and sometimes in the day when she tried to sleep; and how she wanted to scream at times, and how she had to fight against the thought of suicide—how she couldn't see any other way out of the—the——"

She had been speaking more and more rapidly with a steadily mounting emotion. Suddenly, her voice faltered, her emotion got the better of her. She dropped her face forward until it rested in the crimson bow and free tresses with which Jessie Schofield had sought to make herself beautiful.

Jessie, taken by surprise, anxious to console, yet at a loss to understand, felt her head anointed by a tear.

Then before either of them could speak again they heard through the outer stillness the repeated honking of a very powerful motor-horn.

That recent experience of Alice Underwood's with the driver of the yellow car was still too fresh in the minds of both of them for the present sound to be ignored. It filled them both with consternation and sent them rushing to the window.

But it wasn't the big yellow car of evil memory this time. Alice, her tears gone, had an exclamation of relief.

There was a car coming up the Underwood roadway from the public pike, but it was much smaller than that other car. And it was red—a blur of crimson that smote the eye like a red hot cinder, and stuck in it as a cinder would. The little car was bouncing along with a great show of speed.

Almost before they knew it, there it was at the door-yard gate. The driver slowed up and removed his goggles.

Then both girls cried out together. They had recognised him.

The driver of the red car was Alexander Breen.

## Chapter XIV

### THE SANDWICH KING

**I**T was Rufus who was the first to greet Alec.

Rufus had been working in the barn. As he heard the machine coming up the lane with its honking horn he also may have had a momentary vision of an encounter with that other automobilist who had visited his place. But he had recognised Alec from afar. The two friends met at the gate.

"She smiles at miles," cried Alec, referring to his little red car. "A super-two! Takes any hill on high—coming down! Put it there!"

Rufus was beaming as he shook his friend's hand and was genuinely glad to see him.

"Run her back under the shed, Alec," he invited as he swung back the gate. "Now that you're here, you're going to stay a while. Alice will be as tickled to see you as I am."

Alec jumped into his car, opened the muffler, let it snort while a fresh grin suffused his face.

"Sounds like three thousand dollars!" he shouted with pride. "Used to belong to the fire department! Chief cried like a baby and kissed her on the radiator when I bid her in."

"How much?" howled Rufus.

But it was unnecessary for him to howl. The engine skipped a couple of times and subsided into silence.

"Paid seventy-five dollars for her," said Alec as he got down to turn the crank. "She saved me that—the first week—on the gas she didn't burn—when she wouldn't run."

He was tugging at the crank as he spoke, waiting for results after each tug. Suddenly the engine snorted and was running again. Alec gave a quick jump for the driver's seat, apparently afraid that the motor would play him false again before he could get the car under way.

"Listen at that," he yelled through the din. "Got her tuned up like a kettle-drum!"

The car sprang past Rufus and was already at the barn before he could get the gate closed again.

"Dog-gone it," cried Rufus, as he rejoined Alec, "you're riding around now like a millionaire."

Alec preened himself; threw back his shoulders, tucked in his chin.

"Pretty soft," he admitted.

"You must have been making money!"

"Surest thing you know! You poor old sucker, if you'd stuck it out for another week I could have put you next. The guy I was working for sold out to a company—company makes me a manager. Rufe, one of these days the company 'll be working for me. You get me? Bo, are you wise? There'll be a new portrait as big as a house on Broadway one of these nights made out of about sixteen million incandescents—'Alec Breen, the Sandwich King!'"

"Darn if I don't believe you," said Rufus, half convinced.

There was an open admiration, but no envy, in his face as he watched Alec peel off a linen duster and reveal himself clad in an extremely natty and up-to-date suit.

Some men might have considered that Alec's tailor had run to extremes in the matter of buttons and cuffs, had shown a trifle too much individuality in the slant of pockets and lapels. But Alec was satisfied. He pulled his coat down about the collar, shot his cuffs, submitted himself to inspection.

"College-boy brand," he elucidated; "hand-tailored by the most famous experts in Chicago; silk-lined; fancy weave; eight-fifty with this coupon!"

Under the slanting rear portion of the car there was an opening large enough to contain a rumble-seat. The seat had been removed—probably by the fire-chief who had originally owned the machine—thus leaving quite a space in which things could be carried. Alec lifted the lid, put away the cap he had been wearing, brought out a particularly nifty straw hat instead.

"Thought I'd just show the rubes a few," he grinned complacently. His eyes had drifted in the direction of the house.

He gave a start, then a laugh of recognition. "Who's the——"

He didn't complete the sentence. He was off to greet Rufus's wife who had just appeared on the back porch over there.

Rufus trailed close behind him. Rufus was going fast, but he wasn't as fast as Alec. He didn't want to make a race of it. And yet later on he wished he had. He arrived at the porch just a few seconds after Alec. He saw a curious expression on his wife's face—an expression with more than a hint of uneasiness in it despite her smile of welcome.

"If it ain't my old friend, Viola," Alec was saying. "Gee, Viola; you certainly are there with the looks!"

Viola, some bride! I've got to take off my hat to Rufus for that!"

Alec may have sensed something wrong.

"I told you that Alice would be as glad to see you as I am," Rufus put in, eager to save the situation. "Alice, I've told Alec that he's got to stay with us as long as he's in Rising Sun. You hear, Alec?"

"Oh, yes; you must stay with us," said Mrs. Underwood.

And through her mind there must have glinted some thought of how dangerous it would be for her peace of mind if Alec Breen should elect to do otherwise.

"Why, I was sort of fixing to go over to my aunt's," Alec began, frankly tempted. "Of course, if you folks are anxious to have me, and you're willing to let me pay for my keep by letting me run you around in the red jit—"

"Go on," said Rufus. "There ain't any question of paying for your keep. You're out in the country now. This ain't New York—"

"You're right; it ain't New York," Alec laughed, without giving offence. He smiled at Alice. "Don't you ever get sort of homesick for Mrs. Moss's place and Broadway and the first-run films and the trolley-cars and the bunch of live ones in the street? By the way! Mrs. Moss sent her love to you. Told her I was like to see you.

"She says: 'You tell Viola—Alice—that I love her as much as I always did.' Great old dame, Mrs. Moss. She's got two girls living in the rooms where you were. She's kicking about them all the time. Don't blame her. Ain't jealous, are you, Rufe? But they can't hold a candle to the little lady you stole away. Can't blame Mrs. Moss for being sore, can you?"

"Then you're going to stay," said Mrs. Underwood, with her dark eyes quavering into Alec Breen's. "Excuse me! I'll run up-stairs and put on something clean."

"You look all right as you are," said Alec, with undisguised conviction. "Well, I'll be there when you come back. I'll go back with Rufus and put the once-over on the old barn. Used to know every rat in the dear old place! Ta-ta! See you later!"

"You're the same old Alec all right," said Rufus as he and Alexander Breen headed back through the door-yard toward the barn; "but, by gum! Alec—you've changed in one respect!"

"You mean that I'm no longer such a rube," Alec suggested with lively interest.

"You never were a rube, Alec. You always were slick."

"In what way, then?"

"You never were a lady's man; but you are now all right. I can see that."

"Maybe I am and maybe I ain't," said Alec, willing to be suspected, but not willing to commit himself. "Of course, in my business a feller has to be a slick dresser and he's bound to meet some pretty hot Janes. I guess at that I couldn't learn you a whole lot, could I, Rufe, old boy?"

Alec laughed.

"How do you find Alice, Alec?"

"Fine and dandy," said Alec with discrimination. "I tell you I keep seeing a swell line of dames. You know—restaurant open all night—sort of sporty neighbourhood—burlesque ladies—and others——"

Rufus had paused at the side of the well to wet down some bran. At the sudden stoppage in Alec's flow of talk Rufus looked up. He saw Alec staring at an upper

window of the house, while on his face was an expression of alert and pleased curiosity. Rufus followed the direction of Alec's glance, saw that which had attracted Alec's attention and made him forget what he was saying.

There was a girl's face at the window—a face which was oddly familiar, yet one which, for the moment, Rufus himself failed to recognise. The face was preternaturally white; but the lips and cheeks of it were none the less impossibly red, the eyebrows black with a blackness that made the girl's yellow hair look as if it had been bleached.

The face vanished.

"Jessie Schofield!" Rufus exclaimed. "Now, what sort of a trick has she been up to?"

Alec glanced at Rufus cunningly from the corner of his eyes, allowed his mouth to expand into a slow grin. Then he slowly winked.

"Are you tryin' to kid me, Rufe?" Alexander asked.

"Kid you!"

"Do you see any green in my eye?"

"She's been playing some trick or other," said Rufus, at a loss, not knowing what Alec was driving at. "You remember little Jessie Schofield! She's been living over here for a while to sort of keep Alice company."

"It looks like Jessie was learnin' pretty fast," said Alec.

## Chapter XV

### MR. WORLDLY WISE

RUFUS carried his bran around to the back of the barn where a number of cows were complacently waiting to be milked—muzzles streaming as they chewed their cud, flicking away the flies lazily with burry tails, their heavy udders adrip.

The sun, although still high, was pouring a golden haze over the hillside, giving to the woods up there a preliminary touch of the nightly spell. In the slowly wafting air was a mingled scent of milk and hay, of mint and forest-mould.

Rufus paused. He threw up his head. Over his face there swept an expression of solemn joy.

“I don’t blame you, Alec,” he said, “for wanting to come back to all this now and then.” He laughed. “I’m a farmer, I guess. It would have been crazy for me ever to try to be happy in that old New York of yours.”

Alec had no glance for the scene about him. The tepid, scented air meant nothing to him. His mind was otherwise engaged.

“You’re a farmer, all right, Rufe,” he agreed; “but how does the little dame take it?”

“Who—Alice?”

“That was a bad crack I made, calling her Viola; but I couldn’t help it. Mrs. Moss often speaks about her, and, of course, Mrs. Moss always calls her that. Yes, how does Alice take it?”

Alec's expression was one of kindly and sympathetic interest. Any one could have seen, though, that he didn't consider an answer necessary to the question for his own enlightenment.

"She loves it as much as I do, Alec," Rufus answered soberly, as he prepared the preliminaries of the work in hand. "Sometimes, I even think she loves it more. She's more of a poet than I am, Alec. She puts more poetry into life and gets more out of it."

"You're kidding yourself, Rufe."

"No, I'm not, Alec. Those were her own words, Alec; and, by golly! I can see that it's so. I've been watching her. This here old cow had a calf that wasn't doing very well, Alec, but Alice nursed it along. It's doing fine. There it is in the lot, over there, now. It's that way with everything."

"It's new to her yet."

"No, it ain't. She was raised on a farm, Alec. What she don't know about stock and garden-truck, and flowers and birds, ain't worth knowing." Rufus paused in his milking, turned to look at his friend. "Did you ever see a whippoorwill?"

"No, but I've heard 'em often enough," grinned Alec. "Used to be one that 'd wake me up every night. Used to keep a bunch of rocks in my room 'specially to shy at it."

"But you never saw one?"

"That's nothing. Nobody ever did."

"Alec, I'll show you something to-night. You lived in the country all your life—until you went to New York—and never saw one of these pesky birds. I was born and raised right here, and I never saw one, until—will you believe this, if I tell you?

"She's got a tame one, Alec. It used to come every

night out in the honeysuckle vines along the front fence. I've heard it, or one just like it, ever since I was knee-high to a duck. But I never saw it. Oh, I may have seen a flicker out in the darkness that I took for a bull-bat or something. But I can rightly say that I never saw that darned old bird that was whistling at me every night—until Alice showed me how."

"You're raving; but go on!"

"It's God's own truth. She was right out there by the front fence. She was dressed in white, too. And her hand was sort of out. A whippoorwill can fly as soft as an owl. Then, all of a sudden, there it was, sitting on her hand. It was there for half a minute before it flew away."

"What are you leadin' up to, Rufe?"

"To this: There isn't a dog-gone thing, beast or man, Alec, that she hasn't tamed and made to love her since she came out here. And there's only one way, Alec, that you can do that, and that's to give them love yourself. You can grin, Alec."

"I'm not grinnin', Rufe; leastwise, not in the way you mean. But, you know! I've heard the same line of dope so often down among the girls and their fellers in Fourteenth Street; and then the Jane comes in the next night with a black eye. You know, Rufe! I'm not tryin' to knock. What were you sayin'?"

"Just this," said Rufus, good-natured, but a trifle put out, as he turned to his milking. "If Alice was sore, Alec, as you seemed to think—if she was hankering to get away from here, or was discontented, or anything—do you suppose she'd be having any love to waste? They must have given you a raise of pay, Alec. How much are you getting now?"

But Alec Breen was not to be side-tracked.

"You may be right, Rufe, at that," he said. "There may be two of 'em like you in the world. But New York is just about made up of the boys and girls who were born back on the dear old farm. It's the good old dope, all right. They'll get mushy about it every time a new song comes out—'a-sitting and a-singing by the little cottage door.' And, say, Rufe, if you could pull this milkin' of yours in a two-a-day—real cows, real hay—it would be a riot.

"But you don't see any stampede when it comes to the wise ones leavin' New York for Dartown, do you? No; you don't! About all the country most people want is what they get in mixed vaudeville and then a couple of weeks in the summertime—so's they can roast the hicks who didn't leave like they did."

"So-o-o, Bess; so-o-o!" Rufus soothed, as he buried his head in the cow's flank and sent the fragrant milk streaming into the pail.

"Anyway, you've showed your nerve," Alec confessed. "I got to take my hat off to you for that."

"There's no nerve about it, Alec," said Rufus to the music of the streaming milk. "You probably noticed yourself when you were coming up the lane what fine shape I've got the old place in. I've made a lot of improvements. I expect to make more of them. I'm going to have one of the finest farms in Chenango County, if I do say it myself."

"And then what?"

"I don't know yet," Rufus answered, as he slowly turned. "Maybe there'll be children, Alec. I want a family—want to bring 'em up out here in the country, where they can breathe God's own pure air—love America, and know what they're loving—"

"Like me," said Alec, with a touch of his light-hearted but unconquerable cynicism.

"Like me," Rufus answered, with no modification of his seriousness. "Look at that hillside up there, Alec, all covered with lush timothy and sunshine; look at the old woods—hickory, maple, and oak, wild cherry, beech, and walnut. It's good. It's great. God made it. And that's what it means to me when they sing about 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty!'"

Alec tried to maintain a serious mien, tried to cover his amusement with a yawn. But he broke off in the middle of the yawn with a laugh.

"Some kidder, Rufe!" he exclaimed. "Darned if you couldn't be a preacher. But I wasn't thinkin' about you, Rufe."

"What then?"

"Her!"

"You mean Alice?"

"Who do you think? I know—all that line of talk about her loving it here, petting the little calves and taming whippoorwills. But do you think it's going to last? Do you think a girl's going to be satisfied with that—once she's had a taste of real life? You're bug-house, Rufe. Sure! This is all right for a change. That's what I'm here for. But Viola——"

"Alice——"

"She's a live one. She'll stand it just so long, then she'll fly the coop on you. I hate to wake you up, Rufe. I'd like to keep you happy. But I'm a friend of yours."

Rufus, having finished his cow, straightened up. He looked again at the hill he had recently admired.

"You're wrong," he said. "I know her better than you do."

## Chapter XVI

### WHAT IS LOVE?

THAT night Alexander Breen was unable to sleep. There were various reasons for this—his long absence from the country, the habits formed in New York, which necessitated his staying up all night and doing his sleeping in the daytime. These and other minor causes contributed to his wakefulness.

But probably the main reason was that he was face to face with something that he couldn't comprehend.

He was somewhat in the position of a blind man—one who had never even been apprised that there was such a thing as sight—who, through some miracle of cure or development, perceives his first faint glimmer of light.

Not that Alec ever suspected that he couldn't see! Not that Alec suspected for a moment that the glimmer which confronted him now was such a thing as light.

No more than the blind man would have recognised light!

But as Alec lay there with eyes wide open in the slant-ceilinged bedroom which had been allotted to him, he was vaguely aware that there was something about Rufus Underwood, and Rufus's wife, and Rising Sun itself, which he couldn't quite grasp.

If Alice—or Viola, as he continued to call her in his own mind—was unhappy, she certainly had given no trace of it. That thing Rufus had said about her influ-

ence over those who came in contact with her must have been true.

He had watched Andy Jones at the supper-table. Andy, erstwhile so flighty, had conducted himself more or less like a deacon. Andy used to be the gayest dog in Rising Sun—apart from Alec himself. It looked funny to see Andy sitting there, flashing his fish-eyes every now and then in the direction of Viola Swan.

Alec wondered if Andy thought Viola was a saint.

And he had a very lively recollection, as well, of Jessie Schofield. It seemed strange to him that a girl like Jessie—who had always been something of a freak, solitary, bookish—should have taken up with Rufus's wife, as she evidently had.

It was even so—that thing Rufus had told him about Viola's tame whippoorwill.

"I'll have to take my hat off to old Rufe for that," he meditated. "He came down to the Tenderloin and copped out one of the little chickens. He brings her back here and puts her across."

Alec sat up in bed.

"Was there something, after all," he asked himself, "in this talk of Rufe's about love?"

What was love?

Alec drew on his large supply of first-hand observation. For the first time in his life his attitude toward the thing which he understood the word to mean was not wholly cynical.

Love was what made a girl pay her fellow's lunch-check in the restaurant. At the same time, it was that which would cause her, with equal readiness, to try to gouge his eyes out with a fork. He had seen that tried, too; and had had a hard time to protect the company's property.

Now that he remembered it, Mrs. Moss had made various references to love. She had asked him, with a fishy smile, if he had never been in love; and he had answered smartly that, yes, he was in love then—with the coin. Then she had asserted that this was good and proper, but had he noticed the younger of the two ladies who then occupied the suite recently vacated by Viola Swan.

“You’re tryin’ to hook me in,” he had countered.

Upon which Mrs. Moss had practically admitted the truth of his accusation by the way she laughed.

He went over in his mind the love-motive as he had seen it developed in the moving pictures, as he had heard it referred to in popular songs.

“Mush-stuff,” he called it; and, even now, in spite of his awkward interest in the subject, he judged that his contemptuous attitude toward it had been basically correct.

At the same time this sort of love was evidently something different from the sort of love that Rufus had referred to, the sort which Viola Swan was evidently spreading about her.

At thought of Viola Swan, this time, Alec Breen was aware of a creeping increase of his uneasiness.

The night was still with the old, well-remembered stillness of his youth. It was like a lake of silence on which there sparkled a mere gossamer of sound—the billion small-songed insects and frogs; the fine, soft murmur of the night-wind in the woods; the larger, but softer, murmur from a distant riffle of the Unadilla.

He hadn’t thought of it before—not like this—but Viola was beautiful. She had gained a little in weight. She had a glow about her that hadn’t been there when she was living in Mrs. Moss’s house.

Alec liked Rufus. Still, he considered himself by far

a better man than Rufus. But now he began to wonder if, after all, Rufus hadn't put one over on him in appropriating Viola to himself.

Alec lowered himself out of the bed. It was a much higher bed than the one that had so delighted him when he became a tenant of Mrs. Moss's, but it was a more luxurious bed than he had expected—as if the influence of Viola Swan had extended even here.

He soft-footed over to the window and looked out.

As he did so a loose-gonged clock off somewhere in the depths of the house struck the hour with muffled haste. He counted. It was only ten o'clock.

Ten o'clock!

And he reflected what Fourteenth Street, back there in New York, must be like at this hour—just getting into the swing of the night; the sidewalks thick with noisy crowds; the tireless loiterers, white, and tan, and black, male and female, speaking all the jargons of Europe; the flashy fronts of shops and shows; old Doc barking the marvels of his free medical exhibit; the pounding trolley-cars and the thunderous elevated trains; the dirt, the din, the deviltry.

Alec let himself go for a moment under a suffocating wave of nostalgia.

He came up from the wave to look at the night as spread before him here—with its solemn vastness, its huge and clean superiority. It was moonrise, but such a moonrise as merely added to the aloofness and loneliness of everything. It was the kind of moon to silence the crickets and start a heart-broken dog to howling instead, so far away that at first the howling sounded to Alec like the lament of a lunatic or the laugh of an owl. The moon came up, misshapen and wan—in its last quarter—from beyond the blackness of the river.

Alec felt as if he could howl himself.

He was about to return to his sleepless bed when he was aware of some one moving about inside the house beside himself. There was the creak of a floor-board, a scarcely perceptible sibilance of whispering feet.

As he heard these sounds, Alec was conscious that he yearned for human society, for human contact of some kind or any kind, as he had never before yearned for anything in all his life. He held his breath and listened. He heard a door softly open and close, not very far from his own. Then he heard the scratching of a match, the tinkle of a lamp-chimney.

Alec was familiar with the architecture of the house. He had often played about the place when he and Rufus were boys together. The room he occupied was part of the original house put up by the first Underwood to settle in these parts. Adjoining this, on a slightly higher level, was a comparatively modern wing.

It occurred to him that this would permit him to look under the crack of the door and at least see the feet of this other fellow being who wasn't asleep.

He was simply famished for human society, and he had to have it, even if it were reduced to this.

Maybe it was Rufus.

He opened his door without sound. He peered through the sliver of light toward that other door. For several seconds he could see nothing at all. But suddenly he began to shake.

So close and distinct that it seemed as if he might have touched them had he put out his hand, he saw what he knew he had been looking for—pink and white, small and exquisite—a girl's bare feet.

## Chapter XVII

### EYES OF THE FLESH

A LEC drew back.

There, for a long time in the darkness of his room, he confronted himself. This time the blind man had seen a light, and he knew it for what it was. The revelation didn't end there. He had asked himself what love was. As his heart pounded, he told himself that this it was.

He glimpsed some analogy to the veiled hints of old Mrs. Moss. He suddenly comprehended something of the savagery which he had occasionally witnessed in that little restaurant of his in Fourteenth Street.

That was Viola Swan in the room over there. He was sure of it. It was the girl Rufus Underwood had taken away with him from the Old Tenderloin.

And now, after all, what right did Rufus have to usurp this? Why should he, Alec Breen, be denied a share in this joy and knowledge which had come into Rufus's life?

Alec felt that he had been missing something.

He was twenty-three years old. He had gone thus far through life indifferent to women. Money was his object in life. As he remembered it, all the joy of living he had ever known was constellated about the various sums he had earned.

He had hated his father because the old man had made

him work and had never paid him for it, and he had ceased hating his father's shade only since going to New York, where he discovered that what his father had forced him to learn over the country cook-stove could be made a source of revenue in the city.

Once more he heard the tinkle of the lamp-chimney, heard Alice softly returning the way she had come.

Sleep was more impossible to him than ever.

Still in his bare feet he once more made his way to the open window—there where he had previously looked out upon the night; but he found the night transformed.

The moon was only a little brighter than it had been those ten or fifteen minutes ago. The crickets and the frogs were shrilling. The breeze was in the woods. From the Unadilla came the eternal murmur as of listless, unformed speech. But to Alec, as he stood there, the night had taken on significance. It had been touched by the wand of interpretation.

Money couldn't make a night like this worth while. But a woman could. One woman could—this girl who had come up to Rising Sun out of the Old Tenderloin to become the wife of Rufus Underwood.

And what was that thing old Doc had said about all women being alike? Old Doc knew. Besides, hadn't he himself seen enough, and heard enough from other sources, to know that Doc was right?

Old Doc had said that every woman had her price.

The old moon up there must have looked down upon some queer variants of passion since the world began—variants even of that passion which some women stir in the hearts of men.

Before this it had looked through the windows of the farmhouse on the youth who had taken Viola Swan and transformed her so far as within him lay into Mrs. Rufus

Underwood. It had seen the passion of Rufus as something miraculous—savage yet exalted, as tender as a flower and yet as potent as flame, something that contained in it the seeds of ultimate tragedy and ultimate joy, the depths of hell and the altitudes of heaven.

All this was comprised in the passion which Rufus owed to his wife.

Up to the moon there glinted from Alec Breen the signal light of something which was also passion, but different—so different!

Every woman had her price, thought Alec in his heart; and, furtively, with queer flickerings of mingled fears and gloatings, he began to reckon within himself how much the price might be in the present instance.

With an effort of his untrained imagination he sought to summon up again before his eyes a vision of the creature which was to be bartered for. Quite consciously he drew on such experience as he had absorbed as a youth when he accompanied his father to purchase calves and lambs for the butcher trade.

Even some of the old expressions returned to him.

“By heck, I ain’t going to ruin myself!”

“There it is—spot cash! and you can take it or leave it.”

But all this time with a squirming desire, a purpose and a yearning, such as he had never known in his life before.

Out into the warm sunshine of the morning went Alec. He had eaten a hearty breakfast. His thoughts and desires of the night were still strong enough within him, but they were more or less confused by his need of sleep.

This was his regular bedtime, according to the hours he kept in New York; and now, in spite of his new in-

terest in life, and the central object of that interest so near, he was permeated by a growing somnolence.

Not far from the Underwood house, just over beyond the orchard, there was a deep hollow where a small stream, tumbling and purling from the woods, formed a small pond before rambling on to join the Unadilla.

The hollow was a secluded place, all sumac and high fern; yet not heavily wooded enough to make it too dark or cool. Alec found a place where he could stretch out in comfort. The sun flooded down over him with delicious warmth. He closed his eyes and invited sleep.

He was dreaming—still awake and with an increasingly insistent unrest—of Rufus's wife when he heard some movement in the sumac and fern not far away from him. It was his old country instinct which caused him to investigate the sound cautiously.

Perhaps it was a deer. Deer had been known to come this close to the farmhouses after a long closed season. He quietly propped himself up and peered through the tangled foliage in the direction of the sound.

Then it was as if his recent dreams had begun to convert themselves into reality.

There was Rufus's wife now.

Deerlike she was, to a certain extent. She paused, before descending into the hollow, for a last look back in the direction of the house. She was as alert and graceful as any deer. Then, apparently convinced that she was safe from interruption and unobserved, she ran lightly down some path of her own to the edge of the little pool.

Alec read the purport of her movements with a flash of superinstinct which was almost divination. It must have been so, for his heart was beginning to pound while he was still telling himself that she was merely going down there to pick some flowers, or to get water-cress—

something like that—and that she would immediately return.

But while his scrambling brain was still busy telling him this, a more authoritative voice came pumping out of his heart—telling him something that made his mouth sag open and his hands tremble as he stealthily shifted his position for a better view of the little pond.

Once more he saw Rufus's wife. But now, as he looked at her—just as he had looked at her in his dreams—she was not Rufus's wife at all. *Viola Swan* she was—the girl who could be bartered for, she whom any man might claim.

She stood there for several flashing seconds, bare-headed and simply dressed, a figure of light, clad as much by the sunshine, one would have said, as by the clothing she wore.

She stooped down and tested the temperature of the water with her finger tips, then straightening up again, listened and cast a final glance back of her.

All her movements were as swift and purposeful as those of a bird.

There was a little hummock of dried ferns which she had obviously used before for the same purpose to which she put it now. She seated herself there and rapidly began to undress.

While she was still kicking off her low shoes her hands were flashing about. Her shoulders and arms emerged from their cotton covering like something matchless, fresh and new, straight from the maker's, hitherto wrapped up, as against the dust of the earth and the gaze of the vulgar. The sheen and colour of her skin was like nothing so much else in the world as the petal of a tea-rose. From it the same fragrance might have come.

She emerged from her wrapping altogether and stood up.

Clinging to a sumac branch as she pushed one foot into the water, she remained there poised for an instant, some sudden alarm making her pause.

Alec Breen saw all this, but he saw it in a sort of stupor, a sort of visual vertigo.

All his other senses were preternaturally keen. He was vividly conscious of the smell of the earth and the vegetation, acutely alive to the feel of the twigs and stems under the palms of his hands and the warmth of the sunshine on his back. He could hear some cricket or grasshopper clicking and nicking a few feet away from him.

Only his eyes seemed to be incompetent, riotous. They saw in a blur, yet a blur shot through with vivid flashes.

It was only gradually that he could master this sense of his which, for the time being, was the sole end and expression of his life. He noticed that touch of alarm which had momentarily checked Viola's movements. Instantly he crouched lower behind his screen of ferns.

He was in tumult. Yet the tumult was like a stampede of wild horses—a myriad potent and frenzied elements all rushing in the same direction—rushing toward that slender, rose-petal incarnation of divinity which he had seen over there.

He raised his head and looked again, and saw her playing in the water.

It came to but a little above her knees. She splashed it about her breast and shoulders, waved her arms in it, and the air, the sunlight, the water—it was as if they had combined to make her what she was as they might have combined to make a water-lily or a rainbow.

But to Alec Breen she was nothing but Viola Swan—

the delectable, yet debatable treasure which Rufus Underwood, through some blundering act of inspiration, had salved from the Old Tenderloin.

To Alec as he watched there came a fluting from the vegetation about him—a tiny song, had he known it, as old as the Fall of Man.

“Viola!”

For a long time that was the only word which he could think of to fit the song. But presently he was murmuring:

“I will! Why not?”

## Chapter XVIII

### WITH EVIL INTENT

A LEC succeeded in getting Rufus Underwood's wife to take a ride with him that afternoon. It hadn't been easy.

It was Alice—Alice Linn Underwood—who had returned from the rite in the brook, not Viola Swan; and Alice felt that there were too many things to be done about the house, and about the garden and the barn, to permit of her absence, even for an hour or so.

Besides, who will ever fathom that warning sense which bids a woman hesitate?

But Alec persisted.

Somehow, Alec felt that Viola already belonged to him. He felt almost as if she had already given herself to him, as if that bath of hers had been taken in guilty foreknowledge that he would be there to spy upon her. He recognised this feeling as something not based on logic; yet it obsessed him none the less.

He found himself looking to her for some sign of this secret relationship of theirs—something which Rufus wouldn't understand—something which would set him, Alec, and her, Viola, together, pair them, distinguish them from the yokels, proclaim them as New Yorkers here among the country Jakes.

Yet Viola gave no sign. It was only at Rufus's urging that she consented to accompany Alec at all.

Or was this mere pretence on her part?

Alec asked himself, as every sense perception in his make-up, catalogued and uncatalogued, brought him news of the presence at his side.

Viola! Viola!

Even if Rufus had blundered into his early start, he, Alec, would be none the poorer for having waited so long.

The little red car dusted down the lane toward the public highway. The speed and the roughness of the road several times threw the girl into brisk contacts with Alec. If these contacts were not intentional on her part, he told himself, at least she was as willing to have them occur as he was.

His heart began to sing. He could see himself going back to New York not only surfeited with unexpected pleasures, but with his money intact.

The highway was smoother than the lane. Hitherto, Alec had been forced to keep both hands on the steering-wheel. Now he began to take his ease and to show off. He slouched around slightly in his seat and glanced at her.

Once more, just as she had this morning, she transcended his imagination. He saw the liquid eyes, the small and slightly aquiline nose, the thick, fine cloud of her hair. He recognised that colour-tone of her skin, which was like nothing else in nature so much as the petal of a tea-rose.

He slipped his free arm back of her, unexpectedly pressed her round and resilient shoulder.

She gave him a startled look, the surprise of it shaded by a smile. It wasn't much of a smile. She leaned forward. Again she was looking straight ahead. Evidently she hadn't understood. It was a mere accident.

Alec was encouraged. He decided, though, to curb his impatience.

"She smiles at miles," he called.

"I'm so glad that you are prospering down there in New York," she said, with a desire to be gracious.

Alec took thought.

"Bet you'd like to be there yourself," he said cunningly.

"No, no! I wouldn't be there again for anything in the world. I love it here."

"See any green in my eye?" Alec snickered.

"But it's true."

"Say," said Alec, "you can kid the others, but what's the use trying to kid me? You know me. I'm no farmer, am I? You've got to hand it to me for that. No hayseed in my hair! And you can't tell me, Viola, that you don't get kind of sick, now and then, of all the rube stuff."

"But I don't," she answered warmly. "I never shall get sick of it."

Alec gave her a slow smile, slanted his eyes at her.

"That's what they all say," he sighed, with irony. "I suppose you're having as much fun up here as you did right back there in the Old Tenderloin!"

This time, when he looked at her, he saw that there was an extra tinge of carmine in the cheek nearest him. It stirred him with a sense of power that he could thus control the flow of her blood. He decided to amplify the demonstration.

"Sorry I didn't get next to you myself when you were living down there," he ventured.

He gave another glance, but Rufus's wife was staring straight ahead of her. She was silent. Secretly, he wondered if she had heard him; if so, what she thought.

He was getting out of his machine every revolution of

which it was capable, because he had heard that many a girl could be intoxicated by a speed like this. But speed wasn't necessary in the present instance, he felt; still, it might help, it wouldn't hurt.

"Don't go so fast," Alice said at last. "There'll be an accident. I'm afraid."

"Nothing to be afraid of with me along," Alec returned, hoping that she would grasp his double meaning. "I'm the original joy-rider. Came up here especially on your account."

She didn't answer. For the time being Alec himself was busy with his plans.

There wasn't a detail of the country for miles around with which he was not intimately familiar. He had the choice of several roads, and he mapped these in his mind as the car sped nimbly over the familiar highway. Having taken the direction opposite to Rising Sun, he turned to the left by a road that ran toward Bainbridge, then followed a lesser pike that struck off into the hills where farms were few and traffic scarce.

The isolation of himself and the girl at his side was momentarily growing greater.

But now that Alec thought of it, that one look Viola Swan had given him was not precisely one of promise. He decided to leave nothing to chance, and he had a certain means at his disposal.

Finally, he swung off this second pike, turning into a lane which he formerly took on his fishing excursions. It followed a gentle descent for a mile or so between a double row of big, old willow-trees and a jungly tangle of briars and flowering weeds. Beyond these were fields of late corn, lush and dense.

Alec was driving slowly now. The car made no sound at all scarcely as it treaded the soft earth. The arching

willow-trees shut out the sun, and the air was heavy with an overpowering fragrance. Their isolation was complete.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, as he once more slouched around in his seat and slipped his arm back of her.

"Isn't it gorgeous!" she exclaimed.

Her face was animated, her eyes limpid and sparkling. He granted himself the privilege of gazing at her as he meditated what he had to say.

The road was becoming more and more a bower of seclusion. Presently there was scarcely any road at all. The car was in a small and grassy glade on the edge of a creek, with the willows, sycamores, and poplars thick and huge all around. In and about this glade Alec had passed many of the days of his youth. He knew fully its quality of privacy. There was no house within a radius of a mile or so, and the nearest houses lay beyond the creek. The ripening fields needed no attention. Not until harvest-time would any one pass this way.

The red car halted. As it did so Alec had once more cupped Viola Swan's shoulder with his hand. Once more she had started to lean forward, giving him a quick look of surprise that slightly smiled and was untouched by indignation or dismay. But this time Alec kept his hand in place and increased the pressure. He was determined to make her understand.

"Alec," she murmured softly, "you forget yourself."

Alec grinned at her and tried to draw her closer. As she resisted, a new sort of pleasure coursed through him. It recalled his fishing days, here in this very self-same place—the thrill of catching a bass or a perch, a fish which resisted. There was an added pleasure in the thought that he had her well hooked.

"I told you that this was a joy-ride," he said.

## Chapter XIX

### PENDING SETTLEMENT

HIS hand was still on her shoulder. The warmth and vibrancy of her body came to him through this hand as if the contact were electrical. At any rate, the effect of it was. It charged him with electricity and set his nerves to squirming. Still, it would have been plain to any one—to any one not in Alec Breen's plight—that the girl was not a party to his game.

"Alec," she said good-naturedly, "I'm afraid you'll soil my waist."

As a matter of fact, she wouldn't permit herself to put any other interpretation on either his words or his actions than that they were a mere shortcoming of manners. She didn't care much for Alec, but she did feel a certain gratitude toward him as the one responsible for her having met Rufus.

But Alec's sinister thoughts were outcropping more and more, making each instant a more imperative demand to be recognised. He let his hand slip down from her shoulder until his fingers were toying with a fold of her skirt.

"It's sort of lonely back in the old place since you beat it," he said, grinning. "What did you want to leave for?"

"It's nice of you to remember me," she said steadily, making an effort to give the conversation a normal sound, just as she was trying to ignore the fingers that

were toying with the fold of her dress. After all, this was Rufus's friend. So she was telling herself.

"Remember you! Rather!" he pursued. "What did you want to leave us all for like that?"

"Because—Rufus wanted me to."

"He wasn't the only one in the world, was he?"

"The only one I loved," she said softly, with a swift glow in her eyes.

Alec laughed.

"There's something in that, too," he admitted; "but that wasn't any reason for your beating it away from New York."

"And besides, that was what I wanted to do myself—what I'd prayed for."

"That listens good," Alec conceded with a touch of jovial impatience. "It listens like you got it out of a book, if you ask me. But what's the use of trying to con me? You've got the looks. You're merely wasting them up here. Get me? And you had a good start down there in the old burg. Mrs. Moss says so herself."

"Let's not talk about that," whispered the girl. She cast her eyes into the green shadows of the cottonwoods. "What kind of a bird do you suppose that is?" she quavered.

"Listen to me," Alec insisted.

She met his eyes.

"You know that I'm a friend of yours, don't you?" he demanded.

"Indeed I do," she answered, with a note of recurrent cheerfulness. "I shall never forget that Rufus and I owe our happiness to you. I shall never forget how you took care of him while he was sick. Rufus himself often speaks about it. I believe that he appreciates it even more than I do, if such a thing were possible."

Alec took advantage of her little outbreak of sentiment to stroke her arm. She let him—with a barely perceptible quiver. The quiver itself was merely a souvenir of unhappier days. Alec extracted all the pleasure possible from the diversion without appearing to pay attention.

“Of course, you’ve got to hang a certain bluff when strangers are around,” he continued comfortably. “I do myself—you know—in the restaurant—pretend to be surprised when some guy says that the coffee ain’t as fresh as it ought to be. ‘Perfectly fresh! Just made it!’—as slick as that, when between you and I it may be two or three days old.”

He laughed, and she laughed with him—rather doubtfully, not knowing where his conversation drifted.

Encouraged, Alec resumed:

“We understand each other, don’t we, Viola?”

“You must call me Alice, you know.”

“Anything you like, but that’s what I’m getting at—Viola. You don’t bluff your own friends, even in business, let alone friends like you and I.”

“There is no bluff, Alec.”

“I thought you said I was a friend.”

“Yes”—softly.

“And you know that I’m a friend of Rufus’s?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then let’s speak right out in meeting. You know what I mean. You don’t have to throw any bull.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You were earning your living all right before Rufus came along, weren’t you?”

“I’d rather talk about something else.”

“And even after he did show up it didn’t make such a big difference with you.”

“It made all the difference in the world.”

"Not in the way I mean."

"In every way," she exclaimed impulsively.

"Ah, quit your stalling," he said, hitching himself a little closer. "You know what I'm getting at. He could have gone right on loving you, all right, without the Little-Church-Around-the-Corner stuff."

"You mean——"

"Sure! You weren't meant to belong to one man all alone. Come right out now and tell me the truth. Don't it get a little monotonous? Wouldn't you honestly like to have a little change?"

"Alec," she began; "Alec——"

Alec didn't look at her immediately. He gave a glance off in the direction from which they had come, cocked his ear and listened for a brief spell. Satisfied, he turned to meet her gaze. His semblance of good nature was rapidly oozing away, something replacing it which was strange even to himself.

"Let us drive back to the house," she said with forced calm. "I think that we've been gone long enough. They might begin to worry about us."

"There wasn't any reason why he should marry you, anyway," Alec blurted.

"Start the engine!"

"He was nothing but a farmer, but you could have put him wise. You knew——"

"What?"

"That Mrs. Moss wouldn't have kicked. Most of the girls down there have got a fellow, but that doesn't prevent them from seeing life and bringing down the big coin."

"Alec! Don't—I tell you."

Almost unconsciously she had twitched her dress free from his touch, and sat there looking at him wide-eyed

and breathing deeply. She was trying to use her brain, trying to discover the safe path that would lead her out of the maze into which Alec's blundering had thrust the two of them. That it was just blundering on his part she still was trying to force herself to believe. But the appearance of her was having a bad effect on Alec.

"What are you kicking about?" he asked.

"Nothing. Let's go home."

"Down there," he said, "you could have got away with it. You could get away with anything in New York. I guess that's why all the wise ones go there to live. But you can't get away with it up here. You're some peach, Viola, but as a married woman——"

"Do what I tell you," she begged with an accent of desperation.

There was the beginning of a flame in her face, but Alec merely laughed. He was obsessed by what he had in his heart, was blind to all warnings.

"But as a married woman, you're some sketch——"

He had framed his lips to pronounce again that name he had persisted in calling her.

Before he could utter it she struck him a stinging blow across the face with her open hand.

## Chapter XX

### JUDGMENT

THE shock of her action seemed to have been as great for her as it was for him. They both sat there in silence for several moments, motionless, yet seething. Gradually Alec's face went red as Alice's lip began to quiver.

"It was your fault," she said at last, pitifully. "You made me do it. But, oh, I didn't want to. You know I didn't want to."

Curiously, this show of weakness on her part made an appeal to Alec's sense of humour. His grin came back, albeit there was sullenness behind it. He reached out and grasped her wrists. She didn't resist immediately, and he held her tight.

"I'm going to make you pay for that," he mumbled.

"Enough! We're going home."

"Suppose I made you walk!"

"I'll walk."

"How'd you explain it?" he demanded smartly.

"I wouldn't have to explain it."

"No, nor Rufus wouldn't either," he grinned, "with all these farmers getting wise."

She winced, then flared.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You speak about your friendship for Rufus. You accept his hospitality. You act like this."

Alec was unabashed. On the contrary he was increas-

ingly sure of his ground. There was no relaxation of his grip. He was staring at her with narrowed eyes.

"I don't see that he'd have any kick coming either," he said with cunning brutality. "He knew what sort of a life you were leading back there in New York. It ain't as if he was the first man you ever looked at. And I guess I'm just about as good as the next one. As far as that goes I guess I got just about as much money, too."

"If I told Rufus about this," she whispered, "he'd kill you—kill you like the dog that you are."

"Go ahead and tell him. I dare you to."

"I suppose I'll have to."

"Do it, and as sure as you do I'll blab it around what you was when he took up with you."

"Have you no sense of honour?"

"I'm trusted with more money every day than you see in a year, and none of it sticks to my fingers either."

"Then drive me home. We won't say anything about this. We'll act as if nothing happened."

"It takes two to make a bargain."

He had continued to hold her wrists. She had made no effort to prevent him. Suddenly all his initial hope and purpose was flaming up again. One would have thought that he was eager to see her struggle again and feel the strain on the line with which he held her. He raised one of his hands cautiously, ready for an explosion, until he could touch her head. He stroked her hair.

Into the girl's face had come a look at once distraught and thoughtful. Her eyes were turned still in the direction of his, but her gaze passed beyond him.

"You're better looking than you were when you were at Mrs. Moss's," he assured her, with a suggestion of tremor. "Somehow, you looked to me then like all the

rest of them. It's different now. You have more colour. You're getting a little fatter. I guess you're getting more to eat, getting more sleep."

She spoke no word, made no movement.

"I'm willing to be as nice as you are," he went on. "Shall I tell you something, Viola? I watched you this morning when you was taking your bath. So you see that I'm not to blame, after all. It's your fault if you've made me like this."

She quivered when his fingers touched her neck. She would have quivered like that if he had touched her with something painful. Her eyes flashed back and focused on his face again. She bit her lip.

"I'm going to kiss you," he vouchsafed.

"You're storing up misery for yourself," she exclaimed impulsively. "Oh, why will they do it? Why won't they let me alone? It only results in sorrow."

Alec now assumed the rôle of consoler. He let his hand pass around her neck. She held back, but she did not make any great effort to avoid him as he leaned forward. Closer and closer he brought his lips to her face. They touched her forehead. He kept them there, breathing deeply. A swoon swept over him, trance-like, intoxicating.

She was immobile. She didn't appear even to breathe.

"What are you thinking about, sweetie?" he asked with what he intended to be chivalrous sympathy.

"I'm thinking what a cur you are," she answered briefly, as cold as ice.

"Don't say that," he chided her.

He was stealthily bringing his lips back to her forehead again, drunk with anticipation. Without warning she thrust her crisped hands against his face. Her fingers were like talons. She thrust him back.

"Let me think," she stormed softly. "Let me think! Can't you see that I'd be willing to die, willing to murder you—*anything!*"

"You'll pay for this," said Alec, still with a pretence of tender playfulness.

He succeeded in securing her wrists again, dragging her hands away from his face. He pinioned her wrists under his elbow. She fought him like a wildcat. The voices of both of them rose.

They were oblivious to the world about them.

Not very long after they had left the road back there, though, some one else had come to the place where the lane leading down to the creek began.

He had driven up from the opposite direction in a light buggy drawn by a powerful, smooth-coated young sorrel. Intent on the action of his horse, he had passed the lane before he noticed the tracks of the motor-car. Then he meditatively took up the slack of his reins. The tracks looked fresh and yet he had passed no motorists on the road by which he had come.

After reflection, he backed his willing young horse around and turned into the lane through which the car had preceded him. He had been thinking of buying this particular strip of bottom land for some time, anyway. He might as well take a look at it.

Driving down into the shadowy fragrance of the lane there came from the farther end of it, over near the creek, a murmur of excited voices—not very loud, yet staccato with excitement.

A moment later he had snatched his whip. The young horse didn't need it. He had seen the movement. He was speeding over the soft earth with the silent swiftness of a moose.

To Alec Breen there came a gust of nightmare. It was seismic.

A brutal force had struck him, and he catapulted through space.

His head and shoulders struck the earth with a shock like death, and he had an idea that a tree had fallen on him. No, it must have been that his car had collapsed. In any case, it couldn't be that the danger was all past.

He rolled over and over, then looked back over his shoulder.

He could see no one but Viola Swan at first.

How had she escaped the calamity?

He was on his knees in the process of getting to his feet before he saw that some one else was there—some one whom he had known since infancy.

It was Uncle Joel Kennedy.

Uncle Joel was speaking to Viola, but Alec knew well enough that he himself was the subject of conversation. Uncle Joel spoke gently.

"I'll skin him alive," he said.

## Chapter XXI

### HIS GUARDIAN ANGEL

UNCLE JOEL was a man of explosive action as well as speech. He suddenly wheeled and trotted over to the place where he had deserted his buggy. His horse went on peacefully cropping the grass even when Uncle Joel seized his buggy-whip. The horse knew his master well and had no fear of him at all.

The old farmer was standing over Alec Breen before Alec could get to his feet. Alec subsided to his knees again.

Alec's brain was not acting very quickly now that the first excitement had passed. He raised his arms a good deal as a schoolboy might do at the prospect of an imminent birching, and began to blurt something about not having intended any harm.

Uncle Joel's mouth was drawn down, his lips compressed.

“You skunk!” he snorted.

There was a singing swish. Alec Breen let out a yelp of anguish which was more of fear than of physical pain as the whip curved down over his shoulder and back. His loose coat had saved him.

Before the whip could fall again the girl had leaped from the car and run forward. She caught Uncle Joel's arm and clung to him.

“No! No!” she pleaded.

Uncle Joel let his anger subside. He slowly turned and

looked at her, saw the tears in her eyes and the grief in her face.

"Poor little thing!" he said.

He put his arm about her. He stood firm, yet undecided, as she collapsed against him. He shot such a look of savage contempt at Alec Breen, however, that Alec remained where he was—the figure of a penitent. It was only for a few moments.

The girl made an effort and controlled herself. She still supported herself against Uncle Joel, and he still kept his arm about her. For an instant she took thought. They looked at each other.

"He isn't to blame," she said.

"Ain't to blame!"

She read his dawning miscomprehension.

"Not that!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "You know that I love Rufus—that I love you—love you all." She was finding it hard to explain, despite all her willingness to do so. She wanted to hide her face. For the moment she wanted to die. She was to blame and yet she was not to blame. "Alec thought—Alec thought—that—"

Uncle Joel, with the intuition of all fine characters, turned to Alec and made a movement in his direction with his foot.

"You go over there a bit," he said, "and wait."

Alec got to his feet and slunk away. There was no danger that he would run away. Even if his machine hadn't been there to hold him he was safe in the grip of his bewilderment and fear.

Uncle Joel cast his whip aside, put his hands on Alice's shoulders, and looked down into her face. He was as gentle and soothing as if she had been a hurt child, and his face reflected her pain as he smiled at her.

"You don't have to tell me anything," he said, with a touch of hoarseness. "Everything's all right."

"Everything is all wrong," she answered gustily.

"No, no!"

"They're all alike," she sobbed. "All of them! All of them—except Rufus—and you!"

Uncle Joel consciously lightened the touch of his hands on her shoulders.

"Lord! Lord!" he quavered.

There was a comprehending pause, while Alice organised her thought, sought means to express it.

"He doesn't have to be lashed," she said, reverting to Alec. "He's been lashed already. He'll be lashed for the rest of his days. I've seen it before. I've been the cause of it. But I haven't wanted it to be so! And they're not to blame. It's something that tortures them as soon as they see me—something that won't leave them in peace. Nor me! It was that way in New York. It's that way here."

Uncle Joel stood mute. There must have passed through his shrewd brain a procession of facts—out of his long life, his accumulated knowledge of nature.

"I thought that when Rufus married me—when he shielded me with a love that wasn't like the—the—they *call it*—love of the other men, that I'd be safe. Only a part of me is safe. My heart is safe. My spirit's safe. They're his. But I can't make my body other than it is! I can't change my flesh! And that's all they see. They're demons. And it's the devil that's lashing them on!"

She panted. It was a cry from the heart—incoherent, inadequate.

As if words were ever adequate, at such a time!

There was a look of solemn judgment on Uncle Joel's face as he finally turned and summoned Alec Breen.

Alec came up unsteadily, with the old farmer's gaze fixed upon him. As a matter of fact, Uncle Joel's small, clear, light-blue eyes scarcely left Alec's face from that time on to the incident's close.

"Mrs. Underwood and I have been talking things over a bit," said Uncle Joel in a conversational tone, quite as if nothing untoward had happened. "When you get down on your shinbones—if you ever do!—you can thank your Maker that she's got a compassionate heart. If it wasn't for her, I'd have had the skin cut about off of you by this time. Shut up! I ain't through!"

Nothing but a hoarse murmur, intercessional, conciliatory, had come from Alec's throat.

"We've decided," Uncle Joel went on, "that the best thing for her is for you two to go on with your ride, and not let on about anything. If you can't act, you'd better learn how before you get back home. I happen to know Rufus better 'n you do. He's my own flesh and blood. He kills dirty varmints that try to do harm!"

He turned to Alice.

"Oh, I can't let you ride away at the side of this skunk!" he cried, with genuine grief.

"You can trust him," she whispered.

Uncle Joel chewed a bitter cud and directed his attention to Alec again.

"You've got an hour yet before supper-time," he went on. "I reckon you'd better take all of that. It'll give you a chance to think about that little sister of yours who died, and things like that. After supper, you'll take this tin Lizzie of yours and run over to Bainbridge to see if there ain't a telegram there calling you back to New York. You'll find one there—whether there's one or not. You'll be leaving to-morrow morning, right after breakfast. Got all that straight?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Hold on; not so fast! There's something else."

Alec quailed again under the brilliant little eyes that had never left him.

"And if you ever come back to Rising Sun—or to this county—while I'm alive," said Uncle Joel, "I'll wear you out. Pick up that whip and hand it to me."

Alec did so.

"I needn't tell you," Uncle Joel concluded, "that this lady is my kin. Go on now, and crank up!"

All the time that he had been speaking he kept his arm about Alice's waist. As Alec turned his back he gave her a quick caress, full of pity, full of rough tenderness. He flashed a smile upon her.

It was only then that she threw her arms about his neck, kissed him in an access of love and gratitude. She clung to him still until a coughing rumble from the little red car warned her that it was time to renew the interrupted ride.

Rufus Underwood, working late with Andy Jones stretching wire on a new fence, saw the red car when it was little more than a moving spot on the far horizon. The sight of it gave him a thrill of pleasure. All afternoon, while Alice was away, he had been the victim of a vague misgiving. He put this down finally to his fear that there might have been an accident.

Now that he saw the car returning in safety, there was a glow of love and happiness in his heart.

The only blemish on his serenity thus far, apart from an occasional slight pang of jealousy, which was pleasure rather than anything else, was that Alice was lacking in opportunities for amusement.

He felt that the motor run must have done her good.

He was all the more contented that she had had the little outing in view of the fact that he was going to be forced to leave her for a while. A farmer over on Two Mile was going South, was selling out his live stock. He had a pair of mules which Rufus particularly coveted. Rufus expected to be gone for a couple of days.

Rufus could see great times ahead—with a wife like Alice, with a farm like this. He was refencing all of it, and projecting a new barn. He saw how he was going to get enough money ahead for a new system of drainage and irrigation which would make his place one of the model establishments of the State. But he needed those mules. The opportunity wouldn't wait.

He was at the edge of the road as the red car came up. Both Alice and Alec smiled at him in response to his greeting.

"How was the run?" he asked.

It was Alice who answered him. Her voice was rather small. He judged it was because she had been riding for so long against the wind.

"Fine!" she exclaimed.

But there was a quality about both her voice and her eyes that went straight to Rufus's heart and struck into flame there all the tremendous love that he felt for her.

Disregarding the presence of Alec Breen and the furtive watchfulness of Andy Jones, Rufus put his foot on the running-board and kissed Alice on the lips.

## Chapter XXII

### VICE VERSA

THERE was no good excuse that she could offer that evening for forbidding the girl to go, so little Mrs. Rufus Underwood had to stand there and smile while Jessie Schofield took the place in Alec Breen's car which she herself had occupied earlier in the day.

Alec, according to the programme which had been mapped out for him by Uncle Joel, was going to drive to Bainbridge—to see whether there wasn't a telegram there demanding his return to New York.

Alec had expressed the opinion that he would find such a message. He was not quite so flippant as usual.

Jessie Schofield was wild to take the ride.

"Let her go," said Rufus.

The car snorted off into the red twilight. Jessie waved her hand back at them, but Alec didn't turn.

"Alec looks a little down in the mouth," Rufus commented, genially, as he turned to Alice. "I guess he must be getting homesick for his little old New York. I'm not. Oh, how wonderful it is to be here at a time like this—all alone—with just you! Would you like to go back to New York?"

"No, no!" Alice thrilled, as she pressed up against him, drew one of his arms about her. "This is heaven—when we are alone—just you and me!"

The red car was as if once again in the service to which

it had devoted the best days of its life. Over there, in the direction of Bainbridge, the sunset glowed like a superconflagration. The red car was going to a fire. The engine never missed. The man at the wheel was letting the machine fly at reckless speed.

Jessie Schofield, her yellow hair whipping the wind back of her, had cast several glances at Alec Breen. She was in a tremor of excitement.

Impulsively, as the car plunged forward to a brief descent, she threw her arm about Alec and gave him a little hug.

For the first time since leaving the farm Alec looked at her. There was something soothing to him in the sight of her. He could see that she was all confidence and admiration, not to say outright affection. It discovered to Alec just how sore he had been—persecuted, lonely, bitter.

With a sudden rebound, Alec's real nature reasserted itself.

"Some car!" he exclaimed tentatively. "Smiles at miles! Some driver, too! How about it, kid?"

Jessie's answer was so completely unsuspected that it almost caused a wreck. She had repeated that preliminary hug of hers, and hitched herself a little closer.

"Take me straight on into New York with you," she said.

Alec looked at her again to see if she was serious. She most undoubtedly was.

"How do you mean?" he demanded, inviting confidence.

He slumped a little lower in his seat and yielded himself to the pull of her arm. Her arm was plump and soft. He found the contact with it agreeable.

"I'm dying to go there," Jessie volunteered urgently.

"I'll take to drink if I have to live in Rising Sun much longer."

"I get you there, all right," Alec encouraged.

"Look at you," Jessie went on. "I think you're great. Nobody could ever tell that you came out of a place like this."

"Oh, I don't know," Alec exclaimed, satisfied.

His satisfaction was saturnine to a degree. His remark was addressed to the absent Uncle Joel as much as it was to any one. After all, why should he feel so badly at anything that Uncle Joel had said or done? Uncle Joel was nothing but a hick!

"That's an awfully nice suit you have on," Jessie flattered him. "Why couldn't you take me to New York with you when you do go?"

She spoke to him as Delilah might have spoken to Samson.

"Are you kidding me?" asked Alec.

"No."

"Where did you get this line of dope?"

"I've always had it—just like you did. I wasn't born to pass my life among the yokels any more than you were. But I was never so sure of it until I got acquainted with Mrs. Underwood. Don't you think she's wonderful?"

"How so?"

"So beautiful—and mysterious!"

Alec took thought. The events of the past twenty-four hours voiced themselves.

"I suppose that's the way she impresses a lot of you bushers," he said with an affectation of superiority. "You know, I'm not knocking any one, Jessie. But just between you and me, I knew her when she was a little

chicken running around in the Old Tenderloin. Don't you blab!"

"No! Go on! Tell me!"

Alec felt the soft, young arm tighten about his shoulders. The sensation was increasingly agreeable to him. So was the satisfaction of getting even, to some extent, for what he had been through. He was showing his superior acumen as a city man. A fat chance had the natives of Rising Sun to get the better of him!

"Her name then—not her right one, you understand—was Viola Swan!"

"Viola—Viola Swan! What did she do?"

"What do you think?"

"An actress!" Jessie Schofield suggested.

Alec heaved a sigh and grinned.

"That's what they all say," he asserted wearily.

"Then what?" Jessie coaxed with intimate affection.

"There are some things about life in a big city," Alec answered, "that you can't talk about to everybody. If I did tell you, you'd merely get hot under the collar."

"I would not!"

"I suppose you think you know a lot."

"I know more than you suppose."

"Well then, just what do you suppose her business was?" Alec asked, alert, but pretending indifference.

Jessie reflected. She was going over in her mind a good many of the things which she had read in that favourite book of hers. She smiled at Alec.

"I know," she said.

"What?"

"She was a—a siren!"

"I used to live in the same house with her," Alec confided, letting things be understood which weren't so. "That's how Rufe came to meet her."

The red car was rolling into the outskirts of Bainbridge. Alec still maintained the fiction of going to see whether or not there was a telegram demanding his immediate return to New York. It was Jessie herself who proposed that they have an ice-cream soda together. It gave Alec one more quiver of satisfaction, new and delicate, when Jessie spontaneously paid for the treat.

Alec had found the telegram waiting for him; at least so he told her when he came out of the telegraph office.

"When are you going back, then?" she asked.

"To-morrow morning."

Her arm was again about him as soon as the little red car slipped out of the town's outskirts into the open country and the deepening night.

"Take me with you," she invited again. She thrilled the invitation into his ear.

Alec was driving more slowly now than when he was coming in from Rufus's place. There flashed through his mind how different it would have been were it but Viola Swan who was here at his side now talking to him like this. He suffered a slight spasm of revulsion.

"You've got a nerve," he intimated.

Jessie was persistent, feverishly so, now that her project was taking a definite form in her brain.

"Why not?" she pleaded.

"Kid," said Alec, "if they saw me running away with you—me, in this red car, they'd be having all the hick sheriffs between here and New York sitting up with their shotguns trying to get a pop at us."

"If you don't take me I'll go some other way," Jessie retorted after a pause.

"And what would you do after you got there?"

Jessie didn't have to wait to formulate her answer. She whispered it:

"I'd do—what *she* did!"

The night was mellow. The dew was in the air. From the darkening fields there came gust after gust of primordial perfume—the sort of perfume which has assailed the soul of man since time began—at nightfall, as he forgot ordinary business and listened to the call of romance.

The little red car wasn't speeding any more.

It paused. It panted. It staggered on. It wound a grape-vine course along the soft and generous road.

For a while the wheels on one side of it were shuffling through the grass that lined the way. Then, as if dissatisfied with the browsing here, or not having perceived the object of its crazy quest, it suddenly tried the grass on the other side.

"Drives itself," Alec remarked as he realised what the car was doing.

"Good thing for us that it does," laughed Jessie Schofield, with a touch of hysteria in her accents. "Oh, won't we have a simply wonderful time in New York!"

## Chapter XXIII

BY WAY OF FAREWELL

RUFUS gone, Alec gone, Alice Linn and Jessie Schorfield were alone in the house together.

Alice was sewing. She really was Alice. It was as if the ghost of Viola Swan had definitely gone away—ridden off in the little red automobile. The spirit of Rufus Underwood's love—his persistent courage, his almost mystic optimism—pervaded the atmosphere of this place where his ancestors, man and woman, had loved and laboured before he was born.

Alice was conscious of some brooding change that had come over Jessie, but her own peace was so profound that Jessie's state scarcely affected her, in spite of the love she had for the girl. Anyway, Jessie was a creature of moods—like so many girls during adolescence, especially those who read.

Jessie watched Alice with her large-pupiled eyes, sphinxlike, a feminine riddle even to her feminine Oedipus.

“You look so happy!” Jessie exclaimed softly.

“I am,” Alice answered, giving her a quick look, as if startled at her own prompt certainty.

“Away from New York?”

“Yes!”

“I should die if I thought I'd have to stay here much longer,” Jessie gasped.

"When do you expect to leave?" Alice asked playfully.

There was a long silence. Suddenly, Jessie got up from her chair, dropped the book she had pretended to read, came over to where Alice sat, embraced her, sank down to the floor at her feet in a way she had.

"Will you always think of me, even when I'm not here?" Jessie asked, a trifle breathless, a bit distraught.

Alice studied her. She finished by pushing her sewing to one side, caressing the girl's head. There was something definitely touching in Jessie as seen from above. There almost always is something touching in the sight of the top of a person's head—that thatch of dreams, or empty dome; in any case a poor domicile of vanities, illusions, hopes—ethereal transients.

"What have you been reading?" Alice asked.

"Nothing," Jessie answered.

"Then, why do you talk about your not being here? What has happened to make you blue, silly girl?"

"I'm so afraid that some day you'll think that I don't love you—that you'll think I never loved you. But I do! I do! I think that you're the most wonderful person I've ever seen, and I want you to love me always!"

"Jessie! Why do you talk like that? You know that I love you—always shall."

"You don't understand."

"I understand that all of us get out of fix at times," said Alice gently. "Some of us are like that most of the time. But you haven't anything to be morbid about—young, lovely, as good as gold, nothing on your conscience!"

"I'd give everything in the world to be like you," Jessie Schofield declared.

Viola Swan was back again—just for a moment, as

any one might have seen from the way Alice Underwood suddenly flashed her eyes into a corner of the room.

"What are you thinking about, Jessie?" she asked.  
"What has come over you all of a sudden?"

Again Jessie answered:

"Nothing!"

"You didn't tell me about your ride last night," Alice suggested, perhaps with some intuition of the connection between that event and Jessie's mood. "Was Alec nice?"

The girl on the floor was silent. For a long time Alice was gazing down at the blond hair with its dark depths, as one might have gazed at an impenetrable veil trying to divine what lay beyond it—the hidden landscape, the dream-figments which came and went like actors on a stage, the never-ending drama of a human brain, the eternal ghost-play.

"Were you homesick for Clear Spring when you first arrived in New York?" Jessie asked at last—cautiously, one would have said.

"No."

"And afterward?"

"I don't think so. I don't know. All that I know was that I was unhappy in New York. But I had been unhappy in Clear Spring also."

"Why?"

"I had no family down there. There were certain things I ran away from. I found the same things waiting for me when I arrived in New York. They're everywhere."

"What things?"

Alice remembered what she had tried to say to Uncle Joel, out there in the glade by the creek, while Alec

Breen, slinking off to one side, was the embodiment of the things she meant.

"I mean," she struggled to explain, "that you can't run away from yourself; you can't run away from life. I mean that Clear Spring—and New York—and Rising Sun—are all alike. It doesn't make any difference where you are. It's what you are that matters. Nothing else!"

"But I've read such wonderful things—in Swinburne, in Browning. I've sought for them in Rising Sun. Oh, I could never say this to any one but you. I know that I shall never find any one to whom I can talk as I have talked to you. Do you suppose that Browning even could have written 'Paracelsus,' or 'Sordello,' with a lot of old hens cackling about him—how to cook ginger-snaps, make pickles, snub the neighbour, cheat the hired man? What would Mrs. Browning have been like—without London, Paris, Venice? Do you suppose that Byron would have stuck around in a place like this, or Charlotte Brontë, or Theda Bara?"

"You know a good deal more than I ever knew," Alice consoled her lightly.

Jessie rested her face against her friend's knees.

Alice started to resume her sewing, but once more something like an intuition made her glance down at the girl, recall the events of yesterday, including a certain strangeness which had developed between Alice and Jessie during that ride of theirs in the early night.

"What did you and Alec talk about on your run over to Bainbridge?" she asked with an air of indifference.

"He's more romantic than I thought he was," Jessie replied.

"How so?"

"He—he appreciates the larger world," she evaded.

"Look at me, Jessie," Alice said softly. "You can

have confidence in me. What's the matter, Jessie?"

She had spoken on impulse, almost without knowledge of the words which came tumbling from her lips. It was as if they had sprung from a deeper source than her brain—straight from the source of all feeling, wherever that might be.

Jessie's answer was equally impulsive, equally free from premeditation, equally unreasonable.

She didn't look up. Instead, she turned her head. She kissed the knees which had been supporting her. She was shaken in a sudden storm of weeping. She said nothing at all.

Neither of them did.

It was all so unexpected—a downpour without the preliminaries of assembling clouds. The atmosphere had become a trifle close, a little oppressive. That was all.

Alice wiped her own eyes.

All in good time she would know the truth—know just why Jessie Schofield was crying like this. Little Jessie Schofield, with that yellow head of hers crammed with the "literature of passion"—with the "Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great Cities!"

What did those writers know of passion?

What man could ever write about the mysteries and miseries of great cities?

A girl might.

So ran the links in Alice Underwood's chain of thought.

The loose-gonged clock, off in the depths of the house, struck three o'clock—mid afternoon.

Jessie Schofield stopped her weeping, lifted her head and listened. As if it had been a signal for action she got to her feet. She put her arms about her friend's

head, pressed Alice's face against her young breast. She kissed Alice repeatedly.

"I'm going over to my grandmother's," she said hurriedly, with her face this time out of sight above Alice's head.

"Let me drive you over behind Jake."

"I want to walk. I want to be alone. I may stay over there for supper—for the night. But, you know how I love you. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

## Chapter XXIV

### FLIGHT

THERE were four trains which passed through the village of Rising Sun daily, two going west and two east. Two of the trains—one in each direction—were lordly expresses, made up of Pullmans and a mail car or two. These didn't stop at Rising Sun. From a distance they hailed it—a banner of smoke; the long, crescendo whoop of a whistle. And then the express, so far as Rising Sun was concerned, became a memory of flashing thunder. It was different with the other two trains.

On one of these, leaving New York in the early night and arriving at Rising Sun in the very early morning, Rufus and his bride had arrived four months ago. The counterpart of this train, going in the opposite direction, left Rising Sun in the early night and came to New York in the early morning. It was the train by which Rufus had begun his memorable excursion.

It was the train that Jessie Schofield had always seen in her dreams of flight from Rising Sun. She had almost five hours ahead of her now before the train was due.

This was the first fact that smote her, once she had fled from the room where she had said her good-bye to Alice. It was like a pang of conscience. Two hours would have sufficed. Three hours still she might have remained in her friend's company—three hours of comfort, companionship, possibly of enlightenment,

She made a move to turn back. She couldn't trust herself to do so. She might say something that would wreck her plans irrevocably—as she had been on the point of doing when she was back there with her head on Alice Underwood's knees.

These plans were almost perfect. They were born of her own passion to escape, and of Alec Breen's acumen and worldly wisdom.

He had refused definitely to carry her away in his automobile. That would have been too risky—especially for Alec himself—as he had been at pains to point out. But there was no good reason why she shouldn't leave by train.

The train didn't leave the little station near the Underwood farm until after dark. There were hardly ever any passengers there; nothing but a few milk-cans, which the employés of the train hustled aboard without local assistance. Even if there was a passenger it was likely to be some farmer from one of the outlying farms bound for a few miles down the line.

Not to his simple intellect would it occur that Mrs. Jenvey's granddaughter was bound for the metropolis. Arrived in New York, Alec would meet her—just as he had met Rufus Underwood. She would be safe within the portals of romance.

There still remained a number of things to do, however.

The day was Thursday. Every Thursday her grandmother, Mrs. Jenvey, drove five miles away to the Orphans' Home, there to sew and gossip with the other members of the "Ladies' Auxiliary." Thus, Jessie was free to go to her grandmother's house and do there what she would without the danger of being held up and questioned.

She went up through the orchard, following the same path she had taken on that morning, some months ago, when she discovered the mysterious lady asleep on Rufus Underwood's porch.

She passed through the wood and came out into the upland pasture where she had picked the wild strawberries.

There she remained a long time, as if bidding a silent farewell to all the scenes of this closing first act of her life's play—woods and fields, the dark and verdant windings of the Unadilla, the embowered housetops of Rising Sun, the very sky itself.

"I shall never see all this again," she told herself.

And straightway the whole scene took on a solemnity that it had never possessed before. It was all changed. It seemed impossible that she had ever ranged these hills and valleys without knowing that, inevitably, they were eternal, she but the flitting shadow. It was almost as if she had already died and had returned to look upon them as a ghost.

This development of her thought gave her what she herself would have called "a turn."

Over there, on the far side of this pasture, was where, so she had been told, Leslie Shaine had accidentally shot himself. It was one of those village tragedies which had passed into local tradition. Each succeeding generation of children, while out on their atavistic migrations, would point to the place and say: "That was where Leslie Shaine died"; and then pass on, a trifle awed and a little faster than they had come.

It was like that with Jessie Schofield now. It was the one touch necessary to complete the perfect solemnity of the scene and the occasion.

She wondered if the ghost of Leslie Shaine ever re-

turned to this place—as it had just seemed to her that her ghost had returned to it. The thought whipped her into speed, and she fled—through the pasture, over to the rocky and waterwashed cattle-path which led down toward Rising Sun.

Her grandmother was absent, just as she had foreseen. Gertrude Sommers, her grandmother's cook and maid of all work, was messing around in the garden—as she would have said—holding leisurely converse with the hired man.

Jessie entered the house unnoticed.

She had never loved the place, nor the occupants of it. There were no sentimental lingerings and regrets to be gone through here. Still, she felt that her flight wouldn't be complete without the formality of a note. No girl ever left home without writing a note. Decency demanded it. If she did not write one she would regret it to the end of her days. So she felt.

She went up to her room and brought out a writing-pad and pencil. The pad, as it happened, was one she had used at school. There was still a sum in arithmetic on the first page of it. This read:

$$6 + 7 = 11$$

She had always been like that—strong in literature, strong in her knowledge of life; but she simply could not hold in her head the simplest sums in arithmetic. That was the review of herself, at any rate, which now flashed through her brain.

She moistened the end of the pencil and wrote:

DEAR GRANDMA:

I am going out into the great, great world. I am following the demands of my soul. I have felt for ages that life contained something larger and better than I have been able to find here

in Rising Sun. My soul responds to a beautiful promise and now I am following it.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise  
Doth ask a drink divine.

I should greatly appreciate it if you did not sell or kill my red rooster—

That was the sentimental touch, and Jessie suddenly found her heart swelling, her eyes burning with tears. She permitted herself the indulgence of another weeping spell. In imagination she saw the young cockerel strutting about, then his sudden dismay as the hired man started after him, the ultimate flutter and squawk—while she, Jessie Schofield, was perhaps drinking champagne in a glittering hall.

Finally she mastered her emotions. She finished her note with something inconsequential.

Then she made a package.

The package couldn't be large. The make-up of it was largely a matter of elimination. She finally selected:

One box of her grandmother's face-powder, a small bottle of perfume she had received for Christmas, a volume of Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese," and various ribbons and handkerchiefs.

She hesitated long over the book entitled "Metropolitan Life Unveiled." But she was ruled by her head, not her heart. She abandoned it. She not only knew all that it contained; but, also, wouldn't she herself be in the midst of such scenes before very long, herself mistress of secrets here only hinted at?

The village was in complete somnolence as she issued from her grandmother's front door.

She put the trim front porch, the trim yard with its petunias and whitewashed trees, back of her forever.

She crossed the deserted main-street, which, even here in the village, was known simply as the Bainbridge Pike. From this she hurried into a lane which led down to the seclusion of the river-bank.

And the river she could follow to the deserted little station near Rufus Underwood's place, and near which, the night before, Alec Breen helping her, she had hidden her valise and most of the clothing she had brought with her on her visit to—Viola Swan.

"That is the name I'll take for myself," Jessie whispered to herself, and the resolution was comforting.

There in the leafy solitude she felt less alone. The slow and ugly train smoked in at last. Unnoticed, she climbed aboard.

## Chapter XXV

“YOU!—”

**A**LICE had good-naturedly laughed away the proposal that Uncle Joel and Aunt Mary stay with her while Rufus was away. She had Duke. Sally Weaver slept in the house. Moreover, she had expected to have Jessie Schofield with her.

Even Jessie's sudden determination to spend the night elsewhere had not concerned her—on her own account. Rufus would be back on the following afternoon. She wouldn't allow Uncle Joel and Aunt Mary to bother themselves. She wouldn't make such a confession of weakness—even to herself.

Notwithstanding this Alice had passed a sleepless night—a night of retrospect and questioning, of longing and resolution. And, none the less, she was glad to see Uncle Joel appear in the early morning. He had come over from his place, along with Andy Jones, before she was up. She heard them out there about the stables looking after the stock—turning the cows out to pasture, hitching up the horses to some implement or other.

She hurried through her toilet, ran down-stairs, opened the door to the back porch, where all night, Duke, the hound, had been lying guard—whence he had not moved even when he saw the men busy in the stable-yard.

Andy was taking a cultivator straight back to the Kennedy place, but Uncle Joel, free from the more exact-

ing labours of the farm, consented to remain and "have a snack" with Alice, to keep her company.

"Where's Jessie?" Uncle Joel asked presently as he poured some coffee into his saucer.

Alice told him as much as she knew. She even added something to the effect that Jessie apparently had something on her mind, appeared to be a little upset.

Uncle Joel had pushed his chair back from the table somewhat, turned it slightly around so that he would have greater liberty of movement. He sat there with his whiskers on his shirt front, rocking himself slowly back and forth on the chair's hind legs. He suddenly stopped his rocking, brought the chair squarely down, turned as if to make some momentous declaration. Instead, he merely picked up his saucer and carefully drained it.

"H-m-m!" he droned.

The day began to pick up speed and weight with the leisurely preparation of an impending avalanche.

It was just like that—the trickle of loose earth here, the displacement of a boulder over there, a gradual shifting of familiar circumstance; the rush of catastrophe.

Uncle Joel, by and by, returned to his own place, hitched up that young horse of his and drove into the village. He was on his way to Bainbridge to see about some lumber which Rufus wanted him to buy for those contemplated improvements of his.

On his way through Rising Sun, he happened across Mrs. Jenvey and drew up for a chat. He dropped some remark about having heard that Jessie had come in from Rufus's place for the night.

"Why, I haven't seen her," Mrs. Jenvey replied.

"Must be sulkin' in her room," Uncle Joel remarked. A little loose earth had trickled down; the boulder was

displaced; and as yet that was the only indication that calamity threatened.

But, somehow or other, these trifling incidents stuck in Uncle Joel's brain all the time that he was on his way to Bainbridge, all the time that he was inspecting and bargaining for the lumber over there; then throughout the drive home.

Not even the smooth and perfect action of his young horse could quite banish from his brain some vague pre-occupation, some insistent premonition of something wrong.

He ascribed this to his experience with Alec Breen and to other events related to Rufus's wife.

"Poor little gal!" he said aloud.

He clucked to his horse, turned off the Bainbridge Pike and followed, instead, the road which would take him over past Rufus's place.

He had barely crossed the railroad tracks and come into sight of the Underwood house before he noticed something which brought all of those uneasy mental scouts of his returning to his brain on the run. There was a horse and buggy hitched at Rufus's front door. Uncle Joel recognised the horse from that distance before he could have recognised a human face. The rig belonged to the preacher of the little wooden church.

The presence of the preacher anywhere other than in his own home at such an hour as this could mean only one thing.

The thing was disaster—death, perhaps.

But this couldn't be death. Back in the barnyard, Uncle Joel saw Andy Jones—young Jeff Beeman helping him—shifting the body of a farm-wagon. Over in the orchard Sally Weaver was picking early apples.

The preacher stepped out of the house just as Uncle

Joel came driving up. The preacher was sixty, but he appeared to be older. He always did. Now he was looking older than ever—wrinkled, dismayed, humiliated. At sight of Uncle Joel, however, there flashed into his face a look of encouragement.

“Brother Kennedy!”

“What’s the matter?” Uncle Joel asked softly as he jumped down from his own buggy.

“I greatly fear,” the preacher replied, “that some misfortune has befallen our young friend, Jessie Schofield. Sister Jenvey is in there now, discussing the subject with Sister Underwood. They were saying things—”

Uncle Joel didn’t wait to hear the rest of what the preacher might have to say. He foresaw the extent of what had happened—that remark of Alice’s at the breakfast table, what he had said to Mrs. Jenvey a little later on; these two details against the recent visit of Alec Breen—and all that he himself knew of Jessie’s origin and nature.

Inside the front door of the Underwood home there was a front hall—generally closed, dark and cool. Off to one side of this—like a Temple to Hospitality, solemn and opened only once so often—was the Underwood parlour.

It was in the parlour that Uncle Joel saw Alma Jenvey and Alice Underwood face to face.

One of the windows of the parlour, and the shutters of it, had been thrown open—as if in an interrupted movement of the hostess to render the place more agreeable to her guests. Through this, contrasting with the perennial shadows elsewhere in the room, the strong light streamed from out of doors. It was in this light that the two women stood—a striking contrast.

One of them getting old, with the knowledge of ad-

vancing age and fading charms to add to her bitterness; spiteful and wicked, yet borne up by her age to a sort of tragic dignity.

That was Mrs. Jenvey.

The other, young, vibrant, overwhelmed, emotion enhancing her every claim to beauty.

That was Alice Underwood.

*"You! You—"*

Mrs. Jenvey was trying to speak, but she was in difficulties. Her voice squeaked. She beat the air with her fists.

There was only one word in the English language which really suited Mrs. Jenvey's purpose. Perhaps she had used it already. Perhaps it was that which had sent the minister out to the front of the house looking older than usual. It was a word which summed up in brutal brevity the career of Viola Swan while living in Mrs. Moss's furnished apartment-house. If she had used the word before, she now used it again.

The girl, who had been Viola Swan, swept her dark eyes to a shadowy corner. She was slightly crouched—as if under a weight. About her was the look of an animal trapped, desperate of a chance to get away.

*"You—"* Mrs. Jenvey began again.

*"Hold on there, Alma,"* Uncle Joel exploded.

For a moment the three of them stood there static. The very room seemed to be holding its breath.

## Chapter XXVI

LESLIE SHAINÉ

**H**OLD on there, Alma," he repeated more softly, but with no decrease of intensity as he stepped into the room. "You'd better call no names."

"It's the truth," cried Mrs. Jenvey. "And now she's gone and done her best to make my grandchild no better than she is. You did! Don't you deny it! I'll have the sheriff here. That's what I'll do. You viper! I'll show you how you can come to a respectable community and ruin our innocent young girls."

"I—I—" gasped Mrs. Underwood.

But her mind wouldn't respond to Mrs. Jenvey at all.

Her eyes and her ears recorded the facts of the outer world. She saw Uncle Joel. She saw Mrs. Jenvey. She heard the voices of both of them as they reviewed the known facts in the case of Jessie Schofield's disappearance. She was even aware of their conflict of tempers, knew that Uncle Joel was taking her part.

"It wouldn't have happened," spat Mrs. Jenvey venomously, yet on the verge of tears, "if you hadn't insisted that I let her get out from under my influence. I might have known! I might have known why all you men were running out here! I might have known that you were all daft! Let a girl go bad, and there's always fool-men enough to call her a saint!"

"We'll get her back!" Uncle Joel asserted.

He was keeping his temper under control, making an effort at consolation. He didn't seem to mind the aspersions cast upon himself so long as Mrs. Jenvey withheld her direct violence from Rufus's wife.

"Yes! Get her back!" cried Mrs. Jenvey. "To get her back and have the finger of scorn pointed at her—and at me! by every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Do you suppose that just because that nephew of yours wanted to marry a woman of the streets that I want my house polluted? Answer me!—if you can."

The girl whom Rufus Underwood had married stood there and listened to all this. She heard the triangle of her life stated thus pitilessly—her husband, her real self, the scarlet ghost of herself who was Viola Swan.

"Oh, Mrs. Jenvey—" she essayed again.

But still her mind wouldn't respond to the present facts. It was with something else that her mind was at grips.

Jessie Schofield, even now, was probably in New York. And what could the recriminations of Mrs. Jenvey matter when her own soul was howling at her:

"*You* are to blame! *You* are responsible!"

To save Jessie that was the only thing that mattered. But, how—*how*?

Her breast heaved, and still it seemed as if she suffocated. She listened to the inner accusations, and prayed for help—for enlightenment—power.

She stood where she was, but she was no longer a member of the group. Joel Kennedy and Mrs. Jenvey faced each other.

Uncle Joel's face had gone a trifle black.

"What give have you to say things like that?" he demanded.

"The woman's a—"

"Shut up! If she is, so are you!"

"I ain't!"

"You be!"

"I'm a respectable, God-fearing woman. I won't be compared to this dirty upstart. Not even by you, Joel Kennedy!"

"Not even by me?" snarled Uncle Joel. "I've held my peace these thirty years, Alma Schofield! But I know you! I know you—with your sanctified air and your rustlin' silks and p'ison tongue! Answer me! What did you do to Leslie Shaine?"

"Don't you dare to bring him up!" Mrs. Jenvey panted.

Her face had undergone a peculiar and sinister change—as of something made of red and black. Her small eyes burned.

"I'll bring him up," said Uncle Joel. "He killed himself on account of you. He wasn't like the rest of us that you were stringin' along—with your flirtin'—and worse—until old Jenvey come along with more money than the rest of us could offer you. That's why he shot himself. You've got Leslie Shaine's blood on your hands. You're fit to stand here and call names at Rufus's wife!"

"He shot himself, but it was an accident," said Mrs. Jenvey with a voice that was as cold and black as iron.

"Yes, that's what the coroner said," Uncle Joel came back, while his own voice rose and became a trifle husky. "That's what they said. And I let 'em. So did you. They said that he drug his gun muzzle-end-to through the hedge—didn't they?—while he was out rabbit-huntin'. But what become of that note he sent you?"

"There was no note."

"There was."

"Joel Kennedy, you lie!"

"I lie, do I? Joel Kennedy's a liar, is he? This, from

the lips that used to kiss his? Yes, and used to kiss the lips of Leslie Shaine, until they p'isoned him and sent him to his grave. Don't you deny it!" he exploded with sudden thunder. "He died in my arms. I can see him now with his yellow curls and his dyin' blue eyes—lookin' for you, callin' you by name! And, by and by, he sort of come back.

"He knew me. 'I did it on her account,' he said. 'Joel, you understand. You loved her, too,' he said. 'I wrote her a note,' he said, 'tellin' her that I loved her to the last. Alma,' he said. 'Alma——'"

"You're a dirty old scoundrel, Joel Kennedy," blurted Mrs. Jenvey, with tears of rage in her eyes and voice.

The preacher, venturing back into the parlour from his excursion into the open air, received the epithet, one might have said, straight in the face.

"I am a minister of the Gospel," he began, and got no further.

"But I never killed my own daughter because she done nothing worse than I done myself," Uncle Joel stated. "I'm a dirty old scoundrel. I am, dog-gone you! I am and have been ever since I was runnin' with you; but I left you alone after you sold yourself to old man Jenvey——"

As Alice Underwood stood there listening to all this as something entirely apart from herself, there came to her, as if by some inner sense which had nothing to do with her ordinary sense of hearing, the subdued, very distant, distinctly mournful and fatalistic whistle of a locomotive. It was more than an earthly sound. So it seemed. More like a signal out of Omniscience it came to her.

New York!

The place she had fled from!

The place to which Jessie Schofield had gone!  
And then a voice—that same voice which had already  
made itself heard inside of her brain:

“Go! Go! Before it is too late!”

Unnoticed, almost unconscious herself of her movements, she turned and fled from the room. She was as much unseen by the others there as if she herself had been a mere spirit.

Unguided by reason she fled up the stairs, found herself, gasping, distracted, there in the room which had become a shrine to the one pure love that had ever entered her life.

“Rufus! Rufus!”

The name was on her lips. The strong soul which it conjured up became one with her own. They were in communion. He would understand. He understood now. He had always understood. That was love—understanding!

From left to right, scarcely seeing what she did, scarcely needing her eyes, she began to snatch together a few of her belongings. Then she sought something else and found it.

It was the grass-woven suit-case she had brought with her in her flight from the Old Tenderloin.

## Chapter XXVII

### THE RED FLAG

WHEN she left the house she was careful to do so unseen. She was doing everything with a desperate haste, and yet with that presence of mind which so often comes to the aid of the driven human animal in some great crisis.

It's like inspiration. It's like some godlike quality showing itself *in extremis*, as a proof of the old, old belief that the human animal is not as other animals—that it has a soul—that it does have relationship with a power beyond that of the earth-born.

Outside of the house she paused for a moment—there in the sunshine, all space about her. There was a gust of feeling in her heart which was a farewell, a devotion, a promise, all in one.

She was dressed almost exactly as she was dressed that morning she had arrived here. In her hand was the grass suit-case. She was a little browner. She had perhaps added to her weight a pound or two. She had drunk deep of the waters of rest.

That was all.

Had it merely been a vacation

Was she now saying good-bye to it all forever?

The questions may have quavered through her mind, even then, although she was as one possessed.

But the thing which possessed her was not evil. She

was sure of that. It was something that buoyed her up, made her unassailable, gave her dominion over the wild facts of inanimate nature just as she had won dominion over the untamed animate things since coming out from New York.

She was Viola Swan, perhaps.

But she would be a Viola Swan of sacrifice.

So much, and she was racing down the lane in the direction of the railroad station—down that same lane she and Rufus had followed that morning when the hawthorns were in bloom, when the world was in its spring, when up in the sky were the floating promise and benediction of a few clouds altogether tender and pink.

Half-way down the lane there came to her once again that sound which had signalled her to action back in the parlour of the home Rufus had given her—the quavering, but faintly crescendo note of a locomotive-whistle.

Just after this, even as she ran, she could hear the smooth rumble of the train itself—a train going fast, a train whose engineer expects no stop this side of some city remote.

As she emerged onto the platform of the little station she could see the train appear—a mile away, perhaps, instantly closer, larger, larger still, the black smoke whipping to one side like the mane of a magic horse, something that no man nor woman, though gifted with the power of an archangel, could ever stop.

She cast desperate eyes about her.

This was the express.

A hundred times she had seen it pass—shuttling toward New York, whirling westward—had marvelled at it as if she were a little girl. It is only out in the immemorial calm of the open country—not in the city—that a train takes on its superhuman aspect.

She had expected to find some flag—if she had expected anything, in that distracted escape of hers from the house back there. She saw no flag.

She flung herself at the suit-case and tore it open.

There for a moment or two she was pawing over its contents. She found the thing she had been looking for.

It was that scarlet dressing-sack which she had bought for herself that time she first changed her name; the garment with which poor little Jessie Schofield had arrayed herself in her own private rehearsal for the tragic rôle. The thing was the very badge and banner of Viola Swan.

This was the symbol of downfall.

Likewise it would become the symbol of sacrifice.

Death, if need be! But stop that express she must.

With the red dressing-sack in her hand she leaped to the centre of the track.

The train came on like a blast of thunder. It was amazing how far it had travelled in those few seconds she had been engaged with her suit-case.

She flung up her improvised flag and waved it desperately.

“It is a matter of life and death,” she gasped.

She stood at the side of the heaving locomotive. It reared its black height far above her—a monster, yet one as capable of being tamed as any other thing on earth. She cast her dark eyes toward it. As from the second-story window of a house, the engineer looked down at her from the locomotive cab.

In spite of this place where he sat enthroned, and in spite of the oil and grime on his face, there was a human quality about him as his eyes met hers.

He dropped a word to the conductor which Alice didn't seize, but which evidently was to influence the future action of the conductor. The conductor was an elderly man. His hair was white, and he had a small, closely clipped white moustache over a pair of extremely tight but not unpleasant lips.

He looked at Alice—no, she was Viola Swan. She knew that she was when men looked at her like that. The conductor looked at Viola Swan shrewdly, yet with something like a smile.

"You've got a nerve, stopping a through express. I could send you to jail for this."

For the first time since she had looked at Rufus Underwood and heard Rufus call her by name—"Viola! Viola!"—Viola Swan used the art older far than even the Old Tenderloin, older than any Tenderloin; the art with which Eve beguiled Adam, perhaps.

Her dark eyes flared to his, enveloped him. There was a hint of tears in them. Her pink lips parted over her small teeth.

"I knew that I could trust you," she whispered. "I knew that you would understand."

Understand what?

The conductor didn't know. What man can ever know what a woman like her means when she says a thing like that? But, none the less, there crept through the chief official of this lordly express a glow of beneficence that was almost youth.

"You've put us two minutes behind already," he grumbled.

Still, it was amazing how gentle was his touch as he put his hand on Viola Swan's back and gave her a caressing push.

The king of destiny up there in the engine-cab flung

a final smile at Viola as she started back toward the cars where passengers were beginning to peer, where the white-clad porters stood curious and watchful. The engineer was already beginning to speculate on just how and where he would be able to pick up the time that had been lost. It was going to be difficult. The train ran on a slightly overfast schedule as it was.

But the engineer didn't greatly mind.

Somehow, he felt as if he had been rewarded by that one look the girl had given him. It was a look to cherish.

So must it have been with the conductor. The nearest porter, seeing the chief come along accompanied by a lady, had made haste to descend his rubber-topped step. But it was the conductor himself who gallantly assisted Viola Swan to climb aboard.

"Go in," the conductor said, "and I'll find a chair for you."

The conductor remained where he was long enough to give the high-sign to his colleague in the locomotive. It was as if the conductor and the engineer exchanged some other signal—by wireless:

"What wouldn't we do—for a little girl like that?"

Far away, over there on the Underwood hill, a group of natives had seen with wonder the great express come to its sudden and unexpected stop. Not within the memory of any of them had such a thing happened before.

Not only Andy Jones and young Jeff Beeman were there, but two or three of the other boys who often passed that way. With the uncanny instinct of buzzards —no unpleasantness being intended by the comparison—

they had sensed from a distance something unusual at the Underwood place.

There must have been some reason why the preacher and Mrs. Jenvey should have driven out to the place in the early forenoon, some reason why Uncle Joel should have foregathered with them there.

Each man confessed it in his own heart—there were always possibilities when there was a girl like Rufus's wife on the scene.

Then here before their very eyes had befallen the stopping of the express. It was a mystery which held them in almost perfect silence while it lasted.

The engine puffed. The train took on speed.

"There must have been an accident," Andy Jones suggested.

On the back porch, just then, appeared Uncle Joel.

"Have any of you boys seen Mrs. Underwood?" he asked.

## Chapter XXVIII

“IF YE HAVE FAITH”

IT was along toward four o'clock in the afternoon when Rufus Underwood came home. He drove his new span of mules hitched to a light wagon. All the way over from Two Mile he had been admiring the beasts. They were a handsome pair—young, vigorous, exquisite specimens of animal efficiency.

His admiration for them was a theme about which Rufus composed an oratorio.

God was good to create mules like this, a farm like his, a woman such as had been given him! The oratorio soared, filled the sunlit air with harmony. It was music to which the mules lifted their light feet over the undulating miles.

He saw the crowd about his place from a distance.

There was that about the quality of it which prepared him for some shock.

Andy Jones met him at the front gate of the dooryard, took charge of the mules as Rufus jumped from the wagon. Andy was nervous, all devotion.

“I don’t know,” he blurted in response to some murmured word from Rufus, to the questions in Rufus’s eyes.

Rufus ran up to his front door and entered the house. It was Uncle Joel who met him in the hall, who clapped his hands on Rufus’s shoulders and looked at him for a moment or two with silent and hungry sympathy.

"Rufus," said Uncle Joel, "it looks as if Alice had gone away."

Rufus didn't understand. The purport of the words came to him all right, but not the fact itself. The thing that Uncle Joel said was right off impossible. It couldn't be. Alice gone away! It was like saying that he himself was not there, that the world had ceased to exist.

"Where?" he stammered. "When? Why?"

It was only then he noticed that there were visitors inside the house as well as outside. In the parlour were the minister and Mrs. Jenvey, Aunt Allie Beeman, and Mrs. Kennedy—Joel's wife.

Mrs. Jenvey was primly weeping. All the fight had been taken out of her. The preacher and the others had that look of patient submission to the fias of Providence which they might have worn at a funeral.

There in the midst of this little group the facts of the day came out—the disappearance of Jessie Schofield, the note she had left, the coming of Mrs. Jenvey and the preacher, the slipping away of Alice while Uncle Joel and Mrs. Jenvey talked; after that, the odd stoppage of the through express.

Alice had stopped it.

Little Timmy Athens had seen the whole incident of the lady who had flung herself to the centre of the track, risking her life as the train swirled up, but stopping it—just in the nick of time—with that red flag of hers.

Rufus heard all this while about him—through him even—the girl who had nursed him while he lay ill in the Old Tenderloin, she whom he had married and made a part of himself, declared her presence. She was present for him, however it might be for the others. What could they understand? But he understood.

He sat there for a space with his head in his hands—

while his doubts disappeared, while the certainty of her love for him, and his for her, emerged from the mists of circumstance like the Rock of Ages.

He lifted his head and looked at those about him.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed.

The expression was so unexpected that it fell upon the others like something uncanny, like the expression of a madman.

Rufus saw that they didn't comprehend.

"She's my wife," said Rufus with a rising accent. There was in it something of all the accumulated emotions, convictions, repressions, that had been his since coming back to Rising Sun from New York. "She's my wife," he repeated, "and the only trouble is that I'm not good enough for her—that none of us are!"

He strove to make his meaning clear.

"She's gone to save that girl. It was the only thing she could do. She was the only one who could have done it. Who else would have had the courage to do what she did? Courage! Courage! She's been showing it right along, and not half of us have appreciated it. We've been thinking about ourselves. She's been making her fight alone. Now, alone, she's gone to fight the enemy. I know her! She'll do what she has to do. And she'll do it as my wife. So help me God, we're one, and nothing under Heaven will ever anything lessen her love for me nor mine for her!"

"Amen!" Uncle Joel exploded.

Joel's wife nodded her head and wiped away a tear.

"My heart and my prayers are with her," said Aunt Allie Beeman. "I love the child." She seemed to feel that it was a proper time to make confession. "There for a time I had my doubts, even while I was willing

to bow to the will of our Lord. But she won me over. She's suffered enough! All women do!"

Said the preacher:

“Let us invoke the divine blessing!”

The preacher prayed long.

There was only one phrase of the prayer which clung to Rufus's mind. It was this:

“If ye have faith!”

It was in his mind—rather, it was in his soul—as he went out of the house finally into the tranquil majesty of the day's end.

The crowd had gone. Only Andy Jones was there—Andy Jones and Duke, and all those other lesser creatures of the place who had fallen under the dominion of Alice Underwood's love. They, like Rufus himself, were in harmony with the universe as God had created it.

The sky flamed. The red glow of it suffused everything. In the hot crucible the stuff of day was being transmuted into the stuff of night. But it was all one—all one!

So Rufus reflected as he suddenly lifted his face from the work in hand to gaze out and up.

Life was like that—an eternal linking up of light and darkness; but it was all good; all bearing upon it at last the hallmark of the Master Craftsman. So one might see if he but had faith!

Faith had flamed, like the western sky, in his own heart just now. And then, like the subtle changes in the sky itself, where the triumphant reds were dissolving into more tender shades—old rose, heliotrope, and mauve—so was the trumpeting faith in his heart turning into the hues of a transcendent and indescribable love.

He had loved her as Viola Swan. He had loved her

## 242 Those Who Walk in Darkness

as Alice Linn. He had loved her most of all when the cynical but paternal alderman in City Hall, back there in New York, had declared them man and wife.

Here in the open his spirit fled in quest of her—far up, and singing like a lark.

## PART THREE: INTO THE LIGHT

### Chapter I

#### THE BEAUTY MART

THERE had been a heavy rain the night before. The streets were muddy in places—where new buildings were going skyward, where excavations were in progress. But the atmosphere was almost supernaturally clear. Autumn was in the air.

There was a breeze out of the west with a touch of frost in it. This only served, though, to accentuate the brilliance of the sunshine—as it fluttered the flags and the banners, far, far up on the tops of the sky-scrapers, as it dissolved the clouds of steam into the immaculate and shimmering blue.

It was still early morning.

The day-shift of New York's vast and complex activity was coming on duty, the night-shift going off.

Forty-second Street and Broadway was once more a congestion of life—as much of a congestion as it had been twelve hours earlier when the night began, when the movement was reversed and it was the day-shift going off duty, the night-shift coming on.

But now, as then, there was the same feverish push and purpose manifest in those who came and went—boys and girls, men and women, but no children. This was no place for children. It was no place for any one not equipped with speed or high durability; with strength,

or with sufficient cunning to make the lack of strength inconspicuous or unimportant.

Yet it was neither speed nor durability, strength nor cunning, which made these human tides ebb and flow.

It was Beauty.

That was the end of all ambitions hereabouts.

A little while ago it had been Beauty as represented in the latest play, or revue, or restaurant. Now it was the latest dress, the latest hat, the latest scheme to get money, with which Beauty must be served.

For, if an artist ever seeks to symbolise this part of New York, he should represent the tall buildings and the human swarms of it as dominated, driven, and inspired by a beautiful girl, not much more than eighteen, as the years of her present incarnation run, yet with a soul which began its education as far back, at least, as ancient Babylon.

There were many exemplars of the dominant Beauty in the crowds circulating through and around the neighbourhood of Forty-Second Street and Broadway. Some belonged to the day-shift, some to the night-shift. Hardly a town in the United States—or the world—which hadn't picked out its prettiest, most ambitious, and sophisticated girl-child and whispered to her:

“Go to Broadway and Forty-Second Street, New York. You're wanted in the Beauty-Mart.”

Even the dealers in second-hand clothes down on Seventh Avenue, who were anything but beautiful, were none the less engaged in the traffic. So were the hawkers of newspapers and mechanical toys, the chauffeurs and waiters, the gamblers and publicity-agents, the riff-raff and stars of the moving-picture world, the hangers-on and engineers of all the theatrical enterprises thereabouts.

Then, like stalls in any other market, widespread and long established—and where much of the merchandise similarly had lost its initial bloom in the process of time and rough treatment—lay the contiguous zone of hotels and boarding-houses, of clubs and furnished flats.

One such stall in the Beauty-Mart was Mrs. Moss's place.

The house was in the Thirties. Once, it had been quite close to the centre of things. That was when Mrs. Moss was twenty years younger than she now was, when she was still making her losing fight to retain some vestige of the beauty to which she herself could lay claim yet another twenty years still further back.

For hadn't Mrs. Moss herself once been the prettiest and most sophisticated girl in her own native town? She most certainly had. And likewise had she listened to the same old whisper, had come riding into New York all ruffles and ribbons, with congress-gaiters on her pretty little feet, a fetching poke-bonnet framing her saucy face—bustle, hoops, carpet-bag.

The Cremorne was in the full flush of its magnificence then—Greek gods and looking-glasses, artificial palms, private wine-rooms upholstered in plush.

That was where pretty Lettie Moss had made her *début*.

Twenty years later found her managing her house in the Thirties, not far from the place where the Cremorne had flourished.

Still the Tenderloin! Still the very centre of the Beauty-Mart! Still the scandal, the envy, and the pride of lesser towns! Still the hopper into which went so much of the country's young good looks, impatience, greed, innocence, and sophistication!

Now Mrs. Moss was old. Her house was old. Even

the neighbourhood had come to be known as the Old Tenderloin.

But wise!

What hadn't the now bleared and fishy eyes of Mrs. Moss seen in all those years? What earthly knowledge hadn't been absorbed into that once shallow and pretty head? What treasons and tragedies hadn't corrupted her ancient and unlovely breast?

Police-captains who had been as czars in their day had come and gone and been forgotten. So had the politicians whose nod could influence the courts. Gone also were the ten thousand "reigning beauties," "queens," and "female crooks."

Mrs. Moss had known them all.

Yet even she was still capable of a fresh human interest. She showed it on this immaculate morning of the early fall, when, even into that sordid street which was her habitat, there came something of the west wind's purity, something of that eager surge of humanity through and about Times Square.

Some instinct which had nothing to do with her dimming faculties brought her to the glass panel of her door, thence to look out into the murky shadows of her hall. She remained there, staring and motionless—except for some slight fanning movement about her—exactly like that of some watchful and rapacious old fish.

The hall was empty, but there was a distinct shadow on the door leading from the street. This door also had a glass panel; but it was ground glass, this time, with a border of red-stained glass around it.

Mrs. Moss could never see this work of art without recalling the hint of luxury and grandeur it made upon her the first time she ever saw it. A cogent little memory of this swam through her brain now, in spite of the dis-

quieting inquiry there as to who this might be thus loitering on her door-sill.

Mrs. Moss opened the door of her chamber and advanced through the dark and airless hall. She was noiseless. She clung rather close to one of the walls. There was something infinitely suggestive about her of that same wily old fish, furtive yet potentially savage, swimming out of its favourite pool to investigate some unfamiliar object.

Mrs. Moss was close to the front door before she stopped.

Her progress had not been without a growing perception. The ground glass was sufficiently translucent to have given her some idea of the person out there—a girl, for she had seen the shadow of her braid of hair hanging down her back; a poor girl, to judge by the reflected shadow of the out-of-style hat she wore.

But, as Mrs. Moss came to a stop, with the knob of the front door within reach of her hand, her perception suddenly gave a leap in advance. She had heard something—something that made her smile.

The girl out there was knocking at the door.

There was an electric bell in full view at the outer sill. In the lobby there were a dozen other bells—one over each letter-box, a bell and letter-box for each flat.

Still the girl was knocking, as if she had never seen such an arrangement before. For a second or two Mrs. Moss entertained the theory that the electric system was out of order. She abandoned this. Her own bell had been properly rung only a short time ago by a young man who had sought to sell her a new washing-compound. Besides, that out-of-style hat the invisible girl wore told much to Mrs. Moss's sagacious old brain.

She herself had worn an out-of-style head-piece when she came to New York upward of forty years ago.

Gently she opened the door.

There was a girl standing there, sure enough. On her head was a straw hat somewhat of a type which had been fashionable on upper Lexington Avenue the summer before last. It was too late for straw hats now, even if the hat had been of the present season. And, surely enough, the girl wore her hair down her back—a straight and heavy braid of uncertain yellow.

Mrs. Moss, with her head bent and a little to one side, assumed an expression meant to be one of smiling encouragement.

She had noted, moreover, the girl's clean but clumsy and unpretentious gingham dress, her thick cotton stockings, her substantial shoes. Also had she noted the bold innocence of the girl's rather pretty, rather heavy features, the tan and bloom of her skin.

But Mrs. Moss's smile would have sent a chill to the hearts of some people; not so, evidently, to the heart of the young creature who had knocked at Mrs. Moss's door.

"How do you do?" said the visitor. "Is this where Mr. Breen lives?—Mr. Alexander Breen?"

Mrs. Moss, before answering, gathered up her apron and began to polish the outer door-knob. She brought to this task a great degree of concentrated interest—somewhat like an old trout worrying a shiny lure.

"How come you to ask?" Mrs. Moss wanted to know, at last.

The girl was only too glad to explain.

"He told me that this was where he lived," she said. "You see, he's a friend of mine—just about one of the oldest friends I've got, and I think the world and all of

him. He's been up in the—the *city*—where I have my home, and we've done quite a lot of motoring together. He's making a lot of money, I guess. He's certainly a whole lot smarter than most of the boys in the—*city*—”

“What *city* is that?” asked Mrs. Moss, with stealthy interest.

“Rising Sun,” the girl answered, with the suspicion of a blush. But she added: “It's not very large, although it's really quite well known.”

Mrs. Moss blinked at her, pale-eyed, her mouth slightly open.

“You didn't come to New York all the way from Rising Sun by yourself, did you?”

“Oh, that's nothing!”

“And you ain't got no folks here in New York?”

“No one but Mr. Breen—and he's only a friend, of course. He does live here; does he not?”

“I'll have to see,” said Mrs. Moss. “Come in! Come in!”

## Chapter II

### PURE ROMANCE

WHAT did you say your name was?" asked Mrs. Moss.

She had guided the girl into her secret pool at the depth of the hall. The girl was seated there, quite comfortably and complacently, in Mrs. Moss's rocking-chair.

"Jessie Schofield," she replied; "or *Jessica*, I meant to say."

Then Jessie's cheek once more displayed a fleeting added tinge of colour.

"But I don't imagine I'll be keeping that name very long," Jessie supplemented. "I'll be picking out something more suitable, I suppose, as so many—women do when they come to New York."

Mrs. Moss, who had been pottering about, giving her mind time enough to work, turned and looked at Jessie with a note of alarm.

"Change their names?" she asked, incredulous.

"They all do," Jessie affirmed, beginning to rock.

"What do they do that for?" Mrs. Moss wanted to know. Mrs. Moss was frankly scandalised.

Jessie rather enjoyed the old lady's concern. In her own mind, she was otherwise tranquil. She was certain, by this time, that she had made no mistake in the address. The old lady, as yet, had neither confirmed nor denied the fact that Alec lived here. Still, she was

friendly, like every one else Jessie had thus far encountered since her flight from Rising Sun, and Jessie was willing to talk to her.

"Some of them change their names for one reason, some for another," the girl replied. "Romance, I suppose, is back of most of the name-changing that goes on here."

"Romance, did you say?"

Mrs. Moss was so interested that she herself sat down on a chair in front of Jessie.

"Romance!" Jessie responded. "How long have you lived here?"

"Quite a spell."

"Well, I guess I don't have to tell you about it," said Jessie. "I guess you must have heard enough yourself."

"You're ahead of me," Mrs. Moss vouchsafed.

"Do you mean to tell me that you never heard that New York was just a riot of romance and veiled sin and everything like that?"

"Never heard of it!" bubbled Mrs. Moss, with static conviction.

"Why," Jessie pursued, "I bet you that right now, less than a mile from this very house, gentlemen are tipping their hats to ladies that they never saw in their lives before."

"They never tried it on me," said Mrs. Moss, with a return of alarm. But she was obviously eager to hear more.

"Yes, and the ladies are speaking back to them, too!"

"Not nice ladies!"

"That depends on what you call 'nice,'" said Jessie.

She began to dip into her rich stock of knowledge garnered from that book entitled "Metropolitan Life Unveiled, or Mysteries and Miseries of America's Great

Cities." There was scarcely a striking passage in the entire volume that she couldn't have repeated by heart, or, at least, have paraphrased.

"That depends on what you call 'nice,'" she said, with a touch of condescension. "It is no uncommon sight to see a female, covered with the trophies of wealth and bearing the semblance of aristocracy in her rich apparel, drunk on the streets. Yet such exhibitions of depravity are rare compared with the dissipation in which some of the city's best society people indulge."

"Ain't that the limit!" Mrs. Moss panted.

"It's perfectly true," Jessie went on. "Of course *you* never heard about such things, but there are female club-houses, in the better sections, where society belles may indulge their thirst for spirits amid scenes of sumptuous splendour."

"Now, what do you know about that?" Mrs. Moss exclaimed. "I've heard tell that the city was full of fast ones, but I always thought they come from out of town."

"I guess they do," Jessie acceded, willing to include herself in the intimated compliment. "Thousands of women visit New York out of curiosity or through love of adventure; but it isn't long before the majority of them are swept into the maelstrom of vice—as they call it. You know! She may be full of resolution, and 'coronated with the jewels of chastity,' but it isn't long before her decisions are undermined by the gilded libertine, the gaudy matron."

"I bet they never ketch you," Mrs. Moss bubbled.

"One of them tried it already," affirmed Jessica, not without satisfaction.

"No!"

"Yes! Right over in the Grand Central! She was a

swell looker, too. I guess she thought it was enough that I came in on the train that brings the milk. Mr. Breen wasn't really expecting me until to-morrow. I was in such a rush that I got the dates mixed up. But, anyway, when this lady saw me looking around she came right up to me as if she knew me and said she belonged to some society or other that looked out for young girls arriving alone in the city. You can bet that I gave her the go-by, although I was really crazy to follow her and see where the adventure led to."

"Ain't that the limit!" Mrs. Moss mused.

"I just told her that I was going to my aunt's," laughed Jessie. "Then she asked me where my aunt lived. The 'Travellers' Aid Society!' That's it. That's what she said she belonged to."

"And you give her this address?" gulped Mrs. Moss, craftily.

"I said that my aunt lived in Brooklyn," Jessie answered. "Is that very far from here? So she asked me if I didn't want to leave my grip in the check-room. Well, I left it there, just to get rid of her. I was simply wild to get out and see New York."

"No one can accuse you of being green," Mrs. Moss adjudged. "And you come straight here?"

"Almost! And you can imagine how thrilled I was to find that the place was in such a perfectly elegant part of town. I've read so much about Broadway, and the Haymarket, and the Buckingham Palace, and everything. Why, it must be right near here!—the famous Cremorne Garden?"

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Moss, with stifled breath.

"Have you never heard of the Cremorne Garden?"

"The name sounds familiar."

"The most high-toned concert and beer-garden in the

metropolis," Jessie recited, rocking herself. "There are seventy-five tables in the place, and at each table sits a girl, charmingly dressed, who invites the customers to come and sit down."

"Without being introduced?"

Jessie frankly enjoyed Mrs. Moss's innocence. She decided to shock the old lady yet a little more.

"I thought that if I didn't get anything else to do I might take a position like that myself," she said. "I simply dote on romance, and you may imagine what an opportunity for romance such girls have—with all the millionaires and young clubmen coming in there, and famous clergymen in disguise, and senators! Just think of fascinating some one who's an absolute stranger to you, and then having him reveal himself as the scion of some old and famous family!"

"Mebbe he'd be lying to you," bubbled Mrs. Moss. "I suppose"—with a desire for enlightenment—"that there are some liars—even at the—what was it—the Hay-garden?"

But Jessie, with the best will in the world, and likewise the greatest desire in the world to remain awake and discuss this marvellous new world into which she had injected herself, was reaching the limit of her wakefulness. She had travelled all night in the jolting train. The excitement of her great adventure had sent her to soaring as far above the shades of sleep as an eagle soars above the limit of the clouds.

"The Cremorne Gardens," she corrected, with a sleepy smile.

That name, which had had such a tremendous place in her own life, came like a surprising echo out of the past to Mrs. Moss. It was a name which in twenty years she had barely heard.

Where was the Cremorne now?

Where were the familiar crowds who once thronged that particular stall in the market of beauty and youthfulness?

Where had her own youth gone?

"There it is," a voice seemed to whisper in Mrs. Moss's fluttery old heart. "There's your youth seated before you now, in the person of that girl, her foolish head filled with the illusions which were yours when you were her age; her heart, like yours, hankering for the grinning skull she still labels romance."

"Mr. Breen works all night, dearie," said Mrs. Moss. "He's asleep now, and that's where you ought to be. I'm going to give you a nice little room where you can sleep as peaceful as a baby. In the meantime, give me your check-room number and I'll send over for your things, so's you'll have them when you want to get up."

Jessie's head was nodding. It was only by an effort sustained that she remained awake as she followed Mrs. Moss once more through the murky and airless shadows of the hall. Up near the front of it Mrs. Moss unlocked a door and threw it open.

As she did so there came to Jessie's somnolent senses a faint gust of perfume such as might have come to her out of a dream.

"This flat's vacant," Mrs. Moss murmured, kindly enough, yet with an accent of bitterness. "I ain't had much luck with it here of late. I used to have a girl in it—mebbe you know her," she broke off, with a whiff of caution. "She got married, moved up in the country somewhere."

"What was her name?" asked Jessie.

But Jessie suddenly knew what answer Mrs. Moss was going to make—knew it in spite of her sleepiness;

## 256 Those Who Walk in Darkness

because of her sleepiness, perhaps. It was one of those little glints of knowledge which come out of that part of the brain which wakes when the other part sleeps.

She recognised it now, that tenuous breath of scented air—recognised it as she might have recognised a familiar voice.

Mrs. Moss turned and looked at her.

“Her name,” she said, “was Viola Swan.”

“I—I guess I don’t know her,” Jessie said.

## Chapter III

### INSTINCTS MATERNAL

NOT in many a year had any visitor to the house of Mrs. Moss inspired in that old beauty-broker a deeper interest.

The thought that here was a counterpart of herself, as she had been at the time of her advent in New York, kept returning to her, nibbling at some unused portion of her memory, tickling her fancy, awakening imaginations and cravings which had long been dormant. The thought was a sort of magnetic force to bind her to Jessie's presence.

There was, moreover, a manifest sympathy and understanding between Mrs. Moss and the girl apart from this. Jessie herself showed it. Jessie liked Mrs. Moss, and Mrs. Moss vaguely responded to the odd appeal of this.

Mrs. Moss found it hard to leave the girl alone.

All the time that Jessie was undressing herself, babbling with a final flare of enthusiasm before sleep should slip the extinguisher on, Mrs. Moss pottered about the quarters which had once been Viola Swan's listening only partly to what the girl said, listening principally to the still uncertain whispers of her heart.

Jessie shed her clothes a good deal as a boy might have done on the bank of a swimming-hole.

Mrs. Moss picked these vestments up.

Mrs. Moss was feeling within herself the stir of

maternal instincts. That was the truth of the matter.

The gingham dress, the cotton stockings, the homely solidity of Jessie's undergarments were a caress to Mrs. Moss's old fingers such as the finest of silks and linens couldn't have given. It was a caress which swept aside the highly coloured, highly seasoned years, filled her with disappointment, yet infused her with hope. The disappointment was a knowledge of her own failure to scale the heights of success. The hope was that she might play the leading part in helping Jessie to do so.

Youth!

Mrs. Moss looked at the girl's tumbled hair; the soft, smooth fulness of her throat and shoulders. She looked deeper than this—saw the budding character.

With youth and a character like that—informed and directed by an experience like Mrs. Moss's own—this child might go far.

"I'll tuck you in," Mrs. Moss volunteered.

Jessie, vividly conscious of the contact of this bed which had been Viola Swan's, and finding the contact delicious, surrendered herself to the creeping swoon of sleep. She felt as if she would like to dream, for all dreams were on the point of coming true.

"I'll just take a nap," murmured Jessie. "I don't want to sleep too long, there's so much to see and do. Tell Mr. Breen——" But Jessie's head had scarcely sunk its full weight into the pillow before this whole new world of hers went out in sleep.

Still Mrs. Moss lingered in the room, meditating over the girl's home-made garments, over the things the girl had said, over the intimated facts of her flight from the "city" called Rising Sun.

She looked at Jessie. As yet she was undecided as to

just what she ought to do; but, once again, in her flabby old heart the instincts maternal bubbled faintly with a tepid warmth.

"She ain't so good-looking as I was," Mrs. Moss reflected, almost aloud; "but she's *young*! If I was only young like that, and know what I know, I'd be riding around in automobiles, and I'd have my house on Fifth Avenue, and have a pew in the swellest church in town!"

The magnificence of this vision made her pant.

Some time later she summoned Jo, her half-witted cellar-man, and sent him over to the Grand Central for such baggage as Jessica might have left in the check-room there. Jo came back with a rather undersized suit-case of imitation leather.

This, in the privacy and solitude of her own room, Mrs. Moss opened. She found other home-made clothing in it, very neat and clean, but hastily packed. She found the little bottle of perfume, the ribbons and lace, which had thus far served as Jessie's stepping-stone to the larger luxury. She found the one book that Jessie had elected to bring along: Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese."

"Poetry!" bubbled Mrs. Moss.

She essayed to read something in the book, but without success. Her old eyes were still good enough to read the scrawled accounts of the various merchants of the neighbourhood who furnished her with her supplies. She could still get a certain amount of literary pabulum from the advertising bills which were occasionally thrown into her front hall. It had been a long, long time, though, since she had opened the covers of a book.

"So Jessie she reads poetry, too!"

Mrs. Moss let herself go on a fresh excursion into

sentimental reminiscence, away back to Cremorne days.

"There was Agnes Le Motte," she recalled. "She wasn't any better than me—not near as good looking. But she could spout poetry. That's how she come to find that fellow who married her."

She repacked the suit-case as she had found it, carried it into the room where Jessie slept, stood again at the side of the sleeping girl, and looked down at her, trying to evolve a plan of action. She was, after a manner, like some ancient prospector of the West who has spent immemorial years in the quest of a bonanza; then, having found it, doesn't quite know what to do.

She was still standing there, poking about in the muddy depths of her life for a possible clue, when she heard a ring at her bell. She went out stealthily, yet hastily, to answer the summons.

There were two young men at the door—not much more than twenty, pleasant-faced, inclined to be rugged.

"Hello," said the foremost of the two.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Moss calmly. "Won't you come in and set down?"

The young men accepted the invitation, followed her back through the murkiness of the hall, made themselves to some extent at home in Mrs. Moss's room.

"What are you boys after now?" she asked.

"Same old thing," one of them answered, bringing a number of papers from his pocket. "Ain't seen none of these, have you?"

"I ain't, but you might as well read them to me so's I'll know if I do," said Mrs. Moss, with a semi-detached friendliness. "You know I'm always willing to do all I can."

"Gotcha," said the youth with the papers, while his comrade rocked and looked about him with no great

interest. "Headquarters keeps us running around asking for these squabs, but not one in a hundred ever turns up again."

And he began to read:

"'Gussie'—no use trying to remember the names; they've forgot 'em theirselves by this time—sixteen years old, big for her age, brown hair and eyes; distinguishing mark, big mole on her left shoulder; wore white middy-blouse and black skirt, white stockings and black shoes, when she disappeared. Hasn't been seen since the Fourth of July—"

"Ah, come on, Bill," said the youth in the rocking-chair.

"'Annie Polak,' " the other persisted, with cheerful attention to duty; "'fifteen; don't speak much English; worked in a box-factory; looks like she was twelve; white skin, ash-coloured hair, light-grey eyes; distinguishing mark, tip of the little finger on the left hand been cut off in a machine. Missing since August, after scolding by her father—'

"'Katie George; seventeen; well formed; black curly hair and rosy cheeks; wanted to be a moving-picture actress—'"

"Ah, come on, Bill," adjured his comrade; "we got to get on down the line."

Bill finally consented to put the papers away. But he still refused to be remiss to what he considered to be his duty. He addressed himself to Mrs. Moss.

"Anyway," he said, "no fresh squabs have come drifting your way here of late."

"You boys know me," said Mrs. Moss, with stealthy assurance. "You know me, and you know my house, and you know the neighbourhood. Things around here ain't what they used to be. When a girl runs away to

get a little sweetness out of life these days she don't come around a woman like me, nor a house like mine, nor this sort of a neighbourhood. We're too quiet for them, too self-respecting."

"Same old kidder," said the young man called Bill, making a move as if he were going to chuck Mrs. Moss affectionately under the chin.

She smiled up at him, her mouth coming open and her lips puckering in.

"I know," she retorted, "because I was young once myself. You ought to have seen me. My hair come down to my knees. I had the prettiest pair of calves any girl ever kicked up in the Haymarket."

The two young men laughed. Bill patted her on her flabby shoulder. They went their way.

But, all the same, their visit had given a new direction to Mrs. Moss's thought. There crept into her chilly veins not only the lure but the thrill of the danger connected with the thing she had been visioning for the girl and herself. She felt almost as if she had a daughter to protect.

Along toward one o'clock she began the slow and laborious ascent of the stairs to the second floor of her establishment. She came to the door of the small flat which now had long been the home of Alec Breen—the flat to which Alec had introduced Rufus Underwood, there where Viola Swan, nursing Rufus, had saved her own life, perhaps. Mrs. Moss softly knocked and listened. A quiet snore was the only response.

Ordinarily, Alec Breen didn't begin to stir about until two o'clock or after. But Mrs. Moss didn't care to wait. She tried the knob. The door wasn't locked.

Noiselessly she padded her way in, and seated herself with a sigh on the foot of Alec's bed,

## Chapter IV

### RIGHT AND WRONG

PRESENTLY Alec woke up. He was neither surprised nor startled to see Mrs. Moss seated there. Alec wasn't like some people, who, when they sleep, set their souls adrift, have a hard time to get them back again at the time of waking. Alec's soul, figuratively speaking, was always right on the job of life.

"This ain't rent-day, is it?" he inquired the moment he opened his eyes.

"I ain't saying that it is," Mrs. Moss affirmed craftily.

Now, thoroughly awake and at his ease, Alec propped himself a little higher on his pillow, his arms back of his head.

"I bet you don't know what I was dreaming about," he said, as he grinned up at his landlady amiably.

"I bet I do," bubbled Mrs. Moss, staring back at him.

"Bet you don't!"

"You was dreaming about a chicken; that was what you was dreaming about," Mrs. Moss affirmed without humour.

Alec gave a slight start, showing plainly that Mrs. Moss had guessed right. His grin disappeared for a moment, came back again with the advent of a logical explanation.

"I talked in my sleep," he said smartly.

"There wasn't no call for you to talk in your sleep."

Again Alec became thoughtful.

"How do you know I was dreaming about a chicken?" he inquired.

"Mebbe I've seen her," Mrs. Moss ventured.

"I got you there," crowed Alec in triumph. "This wasn't no hen. It was a darned old rooster. And he was all cooked, and I was taking after him with a sandwich-knife cutting the white meat off of him while he run."

"I guess you was the rooster yourself," Mrs. Moss propounded blandly; "and they'll be cutting the white meat off of you, if you don't watch out. You know what I'm talking about."

"Cross my heart," said Alec, freshly curious.

"I suppose sandwich-chickens was the only kind of chickens you was running after all the while you was away," Mrs. Moss suggested.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," Alec parried.

"And I suppose that one of them wasn't Jessie Schofield, neither," Mrs. Moss pursued.

For the first time since his awakening Alec showed excitement.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"There ain't no call for you to try to hoodwink me, Alec," Mrs. Moss informed him. "Mebbe you'll be able to do it when I'm blind and deaf, but I doubt it. I come up here, anyway, out of friendship for you. There isn't many a person I'd do it for. There's no give for me to meddle, anyhow."

She made as if to leave.

"Hold your horses," Alec begged.

Mrs. Moss subsided.

"I may want some advice," Alec confessed.

"That's what I'm setting here for," Mrs. Moss conceded.

"Where'd you get onto Jessie?" Alec wanted to know. "She wasn't to get in here until to-morrow morning. I was going to meet her at the depot. She's a nice little kid. I knew you wouldn't mind."

"You got your gall," Mrs. Moss came back. "You give her my address. She's down-stairs now. What do you suppose I'm running here? A kindergarten? Don't you suppose I got a reputation to look out for?"

"Don't get huffy," Alec sought to soothe her.

"No, I won't get huffy, Alec. It's took me twenty years to build up my reputation. There ain't been a complaint against me nor my premises in all that time. You're a smart young man. Mebbe you think that it's all a joke, with those peanut reformers sticking their noses into everybody's business all the time. Mebbe you think it would be a joke if you got me drug to court!"

"How's that?"

"Running in kids on me like this!"

"Say," Alec declared, "if that's all that's biting you! Where have you got her? Let her come up!"

"You wouldn't be so brash," Mrs. Moss informed him, with mounting emotion, "if you knowed what I know."

"Ah, go on! Don't get huffy," Alec countered with persistent cheerfulness. "Listen at me. I'm telling you that this kid is all right. She's wise, I tell you. That was what I was doing all the time I was away. I was looking them over. You know me! Say, when I blew in among them in the little red jit, I had them all following me around begging me to give them a ride." He thought of a diversion. "You remember Viola?"

"I don't see how she's got anything to do with this."

"Listen at me! Viola and this little girl we're talking about were chums. You get that, don't you?"

"Who, her and Viola?"

"Surest thing you know! You know, up there was where Rufus—that friend of mine—took Viola when he copped her out of this place. Well, Viola and this little Jessie, down-stairs, have been thicker'n a pair of gum-drops ever since. You get me, don't you? The kid's a little Miss Wiseheimer, all right. You can bet your sweet life that Viola's wised her up."

"But Viola's changed," said Mrs. Moss. "You can't tell me. I know these Tenderloin girls once they've married and settled down. Strait-laced ain't no name for them. Sometimes I think that they're the only ones who are strait-laced."

Alec grinned. He put up a finger and, pulling down his lower eyelid, kept it that way.

"See any green?" he inquired cunningly.

"I've known too many of them," said Mrs. Moss, with conviction.

"She fell for me, all right," Alec amplified with gusto. "I ain't saying that she hasn't changed, and I ain't saying that she'd fall for every one. But, say, just between you and I, Mrs. Moss, you know, when I blows in fresh from the little old town, with real clothes on and driving my own car, and a fresh line of chatter like they all like to get an earful of now and then, she melted to me like a hunk of butter on a red hot grill. It was all I could do to scrape her off of me when I got ready to come back."

"I think you're lying to me," Mrs. Moss announced.

Alec grinned, with a manifest desire that it be known there were certain corroborative details he could furnish were he so minded.

"Some kid, Viola!" he affirmed with pleasant reminiscence.

Mrs. Moss slammed down a trump-card.

"If she was so stuck on you why didn't you fetch her with you instead of this little country girl?"

"There ain't no flies on her either."

"Mebbe there are and mebbe there ain't," said Mrs. Moss, getting back to her original contention. "But you're a bigger fool than I've give you credit for, Alec. You're a bigger fool even than you must have took me for when you give her my address and thought that you could get by."

Alec began to warm up a degree.

"Now, listen at me," he invited again. "I'm as wise as the next one. You got to hand it to me for that. I didn't come down here and make good like I have because I was a country-Jake, nor anything like that. You've got to take off your hat to me for that."

"I'd forgot more than you'll ever know before I was dry behind the ears," Mrs. Moss put in.

Alec disregarded the claim. His brain was at work on a summary of the situation. His voice became persuasive. He bent himself to do a fine bit of special pleading.

"You don't get me," he said. "This little dame comes from one of the swellest families up the State. There ain't anything that she don't know. I couldn't help it if she got stuck on me. I'm only human. Have a heart! You can see for yourself that she's there with the looks. And she's a swell little dresser, too!"

"My God!" sighed Mrs. Moss.

"Wait a minute!"

"And listen at you calling that poor little chit a swell dresser! Honestly, Alec! If any one heard you pulling

that line of talk they'd shoot you over to Bloomingdale so fast your hair'd fly out. She's only got two gingham dresses to her name. If she saw a silk stocking she'd throw a fit. Her hat'd make people laugh in Peoria. And as for her underclothes—honestly, Alec—she looks like she'd robbed a dago of his overalls!"

"You leave that to me," Alec advised, miffed.

"Do you know what it'll cost to make her look decent?"

"I guess I got some money!"

"I'm only telling you, Alec. Her clothes alone will set you back fifty bones, Alec. Then, there's the beauty-parlour, Alec. She's got to have her face bleached. You needn't shake your head. About the first good look she gets at the Merry-Merries she'll want to be as pink and white as the next one, Alec, and you can kiss yourself good-bye to another fifteen. You're a piker, Alec. Don't you suppose I got your number? Don't you suppose I know the sort of a yelp you'll let go of when she wants twenty-five to get her hair marcelled? And all this is just the beginning."

"You're trying to kid me," said Alec.

"I ain't trying to kid you, Alec. I'm just talking to you like your own mother would. If you was *marrying* little Flossie down there you wouldn't get a cheep out of me. You can keep a wife on fifteen dollars a week, Alec. Some wives will stand for anything. That's why a lot of the natural born pikers *get* married—cheapest form of amusement in the world.

"But the money end of it is only one side of it, Alec, in the present case. If you was a rich young man, though, I still wouldn't say a word. But, you know, you ain't got any money to protect yourself if you get into trouble."

"Trouble!"

"What did you think I said?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"How about the girl's folks?"

Alec was relieved.

"Oh, I guess that's all right," he said, with a return of his grin. "I was slick enough to look out for that. She wanted to come along with me in the jit, but you can bet your sweet life I was too wise to take that sort of chance."

"Yes, you was!" said Mrs. Moss with mild sarcasm. "Now, you listen to me. I can see that you're beginning to get some sense. I didn't want to pull this on you, Alec, because I like you. I'm talking to you like your own mother would talk to you. Have all the pleasure in life you can. That's what I say. But, as soon as I see a nice young man doing something that might get him sent up then I feel like tipping him off."

"Shoot!" Alec commanded.

Mrs. Moss's final revelation lost nothing of its force through the length of her preamble.

"A couple of detectives was in here not more than fifteen minutes ago," she volunteered, "and they was looking for this girl."

Alec went green.

"I didn't bring her here," he faltered.

"Mebbe you did and mebbe you didn't," Mrs. Moss affirmed.

"She come here of her own free will," Alec blurted. "She wanted to know a nice place, and yours was the only number I really knew. What do you reckon we'd better do?"

"I ain't answering for 'we,'" Mrs. Moss pursued. "But I know what you'd better do."

"What's that?"

"Well, as soon as you're up—and there ain't no hurry about it—I'd sort of take a walk around town and think things over—how much I liked my job and the fresh air and my little red jit and everything. Then, if I decided that I loved this little boob of a country girl enough to risk all these things for and risking to turn out a jailbird instead of a sandwich-king, I'd stroll back here and say how-to-do to her. If I didn't think she was worth the risk I'd sort of beat it on down to my restaurant and begin frying eggs like my life depended on it. That's all."

"But what'll she do?" Alec asked.

He was frightened, but not too frightened to be cunning. Mrs. Moss read his mood.

"You leave that to me," she bubbled.

## Chapter V

### THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

VIOLA SWAN was barely aboard the train she had flagged before it was sliding into speed.

Viola Swan was what she was.

Not little Mrs. Underwood, the farmer's wife, could have done the thing she had just accomplished; nor could Mrs. Underwood—she who had once been Alice Linn, of Clear Spring, Maryland—carry out the work that lay ahead.

Only Viola Swan, once of the Old Tenderloin, educated in the school of sham and shame, of lust and bitterness, was capable of that.

"Go on back into the car, and I'll try to get a chair for you," said the conductor at her elbow.

It was one of those limited trains consisting solely of what some people still call "parlour-cars." The passengers already on the train had the settled and proprietary appearance of the travellers on an ocean liner. But the majority of them had been stirred from their books, or papers, or somnolence, by the train's unexpected stop. As she emerged from the narrow passage leading back into the car from the platform, Viola Swan felt herself the objective of a hundred eyes.

She stood there for a moment, and felt herself once again wavering between two personalities.

One of them was Alice Linn, the country girl, who

had become Mrs. Rufus Underwood. The other was that scarlet ghost which she had fought to annihilate. But it was the ghost which she summoned to her rescue now, into whose protective shade she crept as an adventurous wife of mediæval times might have adopted a scarlet domino.

Viola Swan straightened up, swept her dark eyes over the interior of the car, saw the one vacant chair it contained.

Somewhere back of her was the porter carrying her grass-woven suit-case, but over her arm was still that red dressing-sack with which she had flagged the train. She was conscious of this; and was equally conscious that her clothing was not such as the women who travel in first-class trains usually wear. But up from her heart there flared a gust of almost cynical indifference to the stares of these people.

What did they know about the realities of life?

She found herself in the vacant chair, swung the back of it around to the car, and murmured a word of thanks as the porter deposited her suit-case at her feet.

As at a fading dream, she looked through the broad plate-glass of the window at the disappearing familiarities of the landscape. It had been a troubled dream, but beautiful. In silence she cried out to herself that it should not always be a dream. But there was a note of despair in the cry.

Her eyes filmed. For a space she was seeing nothing. When she again managed to look, there were no more familiarities left save that of the country's beauty—the still heavy foliage of the wooded hills, the lush but cultivated opulence of the lower slopes.

“Your fare, please!”

It was the voice of the conductor.

Viola Swan gave a start. It was a mere flutter of movement followed by a sort of paralysis.

She remembered now. She had no money!

In her haste she had forgotten all about money. In the dread that swept over her, there was a recollection that came to her red-hot out of the past. It was the demand for money when she had none which had slain her old self and brought into existence the ghost instead. The ghost had solved the money problem then. Was it going to be able to do so now? Her heart began to pound.

She turned and flashed her dark eyes up to the conductor's face. There was no conscious effort on her part to beguile him; but the conductor, under his professional mask of stolid indifference, must have sensed trouble in that look for both himself and the girl. He had been looking at her. Now, he suddenly shifted his attention to certain slips of paper he carried in his hand.

"I—I forgot—" Viola Swan began.

The chair immediately in front of her own was occupied by a man reading a newspaper.

Vaguely she had noticed this man while making her way to the vacant chair. Then, as now, he had apparently been engrossed in whatever it was he was reading. Almost alone of all the passengers in the car he had not stared at her. So far as she had noticed, he had not even lowered his newspaper. She had not so much as seen his face.

Now, although he remained concealed, Viola knew that he was watchful, listening.

The conductor stooped forward, spoke softly.

"I must have your fare. You surely have enough money to Millford Junction. We'll be there in ten minutes."

"I wanted to go to New York."

"I'm afraid you've got me into trouble as it is."

"It was a question of life or death," said Viola Swan.

They were the only words that came to her. The accent she unconsciously gave them robbed them of their banality.

The passenger in the chair next her own lowered his newspaper somewhat.

"We're not supposed to take passengers, or put them off, at Milford Junction," the conductor continued, patiently. "But that's the last stop we make this side of New York. I'll have enough to explain. How much money have you?"

"None!"

It was a whisper. Mechanically she began to fold the red dressing-sack preparatory to putting it into the suitcase at her feet. That preliminary paralysis of dread had left her body, had become a paralysis of her powers of thought instead.

There was a long, a very long interval of suspense—several seconds, perhaps, while the click and rush of the train became crescendo, while Milford Junction rushed closer and closer upon her like a devastating dragon.

Was Milford Junction to be the terminus of her flight? She had heard about the place—a railroad junction simply, less than twenty miles from her starting point, immeasurably far from New York.

The conductor was again ostensibly absorbed in his contemplation of those printed slips he held. The conductor's salary was none too large. He had a family to support. The discipline of the great company which employed him was like the discipline of an army perpetually in the field. A breach of its rules meant dismissal, which was an equivalent of death—to a man of his

age. And yet, here was a flash of elemental womanhood throwing a new light on drab problems, transfiguring them, unsettling his judgments.

The conductor was elderly. He must have possessed some unusual qualities to have grown grey in the service, to be in command of a train like this.

Without appearing to do so, he watched the girl open the suit-case and press the red garment down. Up from the jumble of what else the suit-case contained there came a slight, invisible cloud of incense such as may have been offered in ancient Greece, at the altar of Aphrodite.

“Have you any friends in New York?” the conductor asked, as Viola straightened up.

She was about to answer him, but took a second thought, and bit her lip. Then she shook her head. She couldn’t help it, but the tears were coming. Knowledge of this brought an extra touch of colour to her cheeks. She tried to speak, but her pink lips merely opened over her small white teeth.

The man with the newspaper now lowered it enough to look at her. He was wearing a cap. Only this, and the shaded eyes under the visor of it, were visible. The eyes were clear and grey.

Then, quite slowly, as if there were something momentous in the action, he lowered the newspaper.

“I beg your pardon,” he began.

Both the conductor and Viola were looking at him. The face was pleasant enough—that of a man in good health, still young, intelligent, cleanly barbered. The only thing to mar the face was a livid scar, of a wound only recently healed, jagged, a couple of inches long, high up on his right cheek.

“If the lady will permit me,” the stranger pursued,

speaking softly, leaning forward, to keep the interchange from the attention of the other passengers.

Viola gave a gasp. It was to have been a gasp of protest, but both the stranger and conductor interpreted it otherwise. They disregarded her quite—the conductor shifting closer to the stranger as the stranger brought out his bill-fold. They whispered together. Not even Viola could hear what was said.

The soothing, cultivated drone of the stranger's voice was all that reached her as she saw him pass some bills into the conductor's hand, saw the conductor prepare the receipt. Only when the conductor turned to leave could she muster up strength enough to attempt a protest. She could have sobbed. It was the stranger who answered her.

"That's nothing! That's nothing!" he murmured soothingly.

He had leaned a little closer to her. For the first time since Viola had entered the car they were face to face.

"Besides, I was in your debt," she heard him say. "I owed you something more than money, though. I owed you—an apology."

As he said this she saw that the scar up close to his temple was changing from pinkish white to red. There was something about the spectacle of this that fascinated her, but her eyes swept to his.

"I—I don't understand," she answered breathlessly.

"You don't recognise me," he said gently.

There was a forced smile on his lips, but the general expression of his face was rather one of pain than anything else, and the scar was flaming brighter still.

"You don't recognise me; but I recognised the place—back there—and I recognised you." He faltered. He stammered. "Have you forgotten that incident—of the crock of cream?"

## Chapter VI

BY WAY OF AMENDS

**R**IIGHT off, the situation struck her as incredible. Just now she had seen this stranger render her a service for which she would have bartered her life almost. There was no misjudging the action either. There was no pose in it, no condescension, no bargain of the sort which had sickened her and poisoned her in the old days, down in New York.

The action had been inspired by chivalry—her intuition told her that; chivalry plus that reason he himself had mentioned about his being in her debt.

Yet there was that scar on his face—the brand—which she herself had put there.

“You’ve placed me very deeply in your debt,” she thrilled.

The stranger had made a movement as if to reopen his newspaper, willing to close the incident then and there if she so desired.

“It was nothing,” he averred.

“I can at least see that the money is returned to you,” she pursued. “As for your generosity in having offered it, that is greater than I can ever repay.”

The stranger appeared to abstract a melancholy satisfaction from her words. A thought struck him.

“Since you have been good enough to accept the little amends I’ve already offered, won’t you go further?” He

reflected before he made his meaning clear, then again drew out his bill-fold.

He must have noticed the renewed flush in Viola's face, but it wasn't money he offered her—not immediately. He extracted a card. All his movements were thoughtful, distraught, fit to disarm the undesirable interest of any passengers who may have been looking at them. As a matter of fact, though, they were almost completely shielded from observation by the high backs of their chairs. "I am——"

He handed her a card.

"Mr. Josiah Pennington, Gotham Club, New York," she read.

"That is my town address," he told her. Not quite sure of her attitude toward him, he shifted his gaze to the whirling landscape and continued: "I have a country place down near Elmira. I was taking a run into New York when I—when you—when we——"

"I shall get the money back to you at the Gotham Club, Mr. Pennington," she said hastily.

He glanced at her again. Their eyes met.

"I wasn't thinking of the money," he said with a rueful smile.

"I know."

"I was thinking of how I might convince you that I am not the—the bounder you have every reason for believing me. I don't know what got into me. I guess it must have been——"

He became a trifle disconcerted. It was as if at the sight of that glowing face there in front of him he suddenly became aware just what it was that had "got into him."

Viola herself understood. She saw the flicker in his eyes. It may even have occurred to her that she was

no longer either penniless or helpless or without a friend. There may have glinted in her brain some fragment of the old, original dream of dominion which every woman, consciously or unconsciously, carries about with her.

"You branded me for what I was," he said with a smile; "not for what I pretend to be, nor want to be. I suppose it's that which hurt so infernally much."

"I've got the same sort of a brand on me," said Viola Swan impulsively. The words surprised her after they were out. But the truth of them wouldn't be denied. "I don't blame you—not for anything. I am so sorry—so sorry—that I hurt you."

Her sorrow was genuine enough. Her voice was saturated with it. So was her face.

"I don't quite—gather your meaning—about that brand of yours," said Pennington slowly.

There fell between them a period of silence that may have lasted a minute. Their eyes had met and held—his, discerning, manifestly the eyes of a man of the world; hers startled, shy, yet resolute to keep nothing hidden.

"I understand; I beg your pardon," said Pennington.

He appeared to be increasingly troubled. Viola let her eyes stray to the window. They dropped to the little old suit-case. But it was several seconds before the focus of her sight could find an object so close. When she did take note of the suit-case it startled her as the sight of an object long lost might have done. It startled her so that she flashed her eyes to Pennington. She found him looking at her. They smiled at each other—the smile that might be exchanged by two veterans maimed in the same war.

Some whisper to Viola from that other self who was Mrs. Rufus Underwood told her that in speech there

was refuge from what she felt to be her soul's nakedness. She spoke softly, hastily.

"There was a girl living in our village back there. She was a mere child. She ran off to New York. She had been with me a great deal. They blamed me for her going. I blamed myself, although I wouldn't have had the thing happen for anything in the world. I started out to bring her back."

"It was for that you flagged the fastest train on the road, forgot your money, forgot yourself."

"I knew what she was going to. She didn't."

"Do you know her address?"

"No. I can only guess."

Pennington took thought seriously. He looked at her, but his eyes for the time being merely passed over, went beyond her.

"I know New York pretty well," he volunteered modestly. "I've lived there more or less all my life." He was suddenly looking at her again. "You and I understand each other," he said with more directness than he had hitherto ventured to show. "We're friends. Tell me that we are."

"Yes."

Her voice was as soft as a caress.

"As a friend," he continued, "I'm not going to thrust myself upon you, but I'm going to ask you to let me help you."

"You've already helped me."

"Not more than you have helped me," he responded brightly. "You're helping me to get rid of this brand."

"Maybe I can get rid of my own," she whispered.

He let a few seconds elapse.

"You'll be able to get into touch with me almost any time at the Gotham Club," he said. Again he was re-

flecting. "If I'm not there and the matter is urgent—no, even if it isn't urgent, but you should wish to see me—call this number."

He took the card she was still holding. He penciled something on it and passed it back to her.

"In the meantime," he went on, less at his ease, "there is an immediate need that we both have to think about. Am I still your friend?"

"Yes."

"No one can see us. I want you to take this money."

"Oh, I can't."

"You must."

"How do you know—know that I can pay you back?"

The colour flamed in her face. Her eyes were dark and liquid fire. She had wanted to say that she was ashamed. Her face said it for her. Pennington was trying to make the situation easy for both of them. He also was in difficulties.

Viola Swan was making the same sort of an appeal to him as she had made back there in the springhouse that day he had called at the Underwood farm in his touring-car, that day this woman had struck not at him so much as she had struck at the thing that had followed her out of New York.

"You've dropped your handkerchief," said Pennington in tones that others might hear.

He stooped, then he leaned back in his chair again.

Viola Swan, looking down into her lap, saw that he had placed there a folded packet of green and yellow bills.

Milford Junction had ceased to be even so much as a memory. The fast train had swung into a rhythm of high speed which seemed almost planetary, something which could never alter or have an end. Rivers, mountains,

cultivated valleys, villages, and towns reeled away—at a mile a minute, a little more, a little less.

Suddenly it occurred to Viola Swan that something else had become likewise almost less than a memory.

For, with every mile she put behind her, deeper still into the oblivion went that personality of hers that had been Mrs. Rufus Underwood. Like the facts of the physical landscape, visible through the car-window, went the dissolving facts of her recent existence in and about Rising Sun. More yet, each mile carried her further yet into the magnetic field of New York.

The human magnet! The implement fashioned of steel and cement, of blood and mind, which spread the currents of its attraction out to the very fringes of the world! In drab and monotonous towns, in isolated farms, in distant States, boys felt the quiver of its electric appeal in their brains, girls in their brains and hearts.

Viola Swan herself felt the thrill of it now, and recognised it for what it was.

New York was drawing near.

It was the voice of New York which kept calling to her:

“You’re Viola Swan and you belong to me!”

## Chapter VII

### THE OLD PLACE

HE had dined with Pennington while the train, like an animate thing inflamed with love, sped on to keep the tryst.

New York!

And she was in a taxi, Pennington at the door of it trying to give a matter-of-fact atmosphere to their leave-taking.

“Good-bye,” he said. “Good luck!”

Their fingers fluttered in contact. It was a tremulous moment when the slightest psychic jolt might have sent either of them or both of them toppling into at least some little demonstration of the sentiments which inspired them.

Both knew this, perhaps. Both certainly knew that small flames easily become disastrous conflagrations when the circumstances are right.

The door of the cab banged shut. A wait, and the car was digging its way into the thick of the shuttling traffic.

It was Pennington who had given the chauffeur the address. Viola Swan had remarked the deft glint of worldly knowledge in his face when she had told him the number of that street “in the Thirties.” Something of the same look was there when she told him that, so long as she was in New York her name would be—Viola Swan.

Now that Pennington was gone into that limbo of things unseen, it surprised her when she recalled how many things she had told him. But Pennington himself surprised her, now that she came to think of him in perspective—in that perspective of all the other men she had ever known. He had shown himself to be almost as surprising as Rufus himself.

She was glad that Pennington had not attempted to kiss her, as he stood there at the door of the taxi. She might have yielded, if he had sought to kiss her—yielded out of friendship, out of gratitude, out of contrition.

But that would have been damnable indeed, after having accepted money from him, even as a loan.

She tried to tell herself that she was glad to be alone. No use!

This was New York, the familiar, in the first glitter of the young night. The sky was still pallid—all dim pinks and blues; but against this the mass of the city was a sort of gemmed and constellated blackness, crude and vociferous, brazen and mighty, as indifferent to individual yearnings and heartbreaks as the Harlot of Revelation.

Out of all this there came to Viola Swan a whiff of cold fear.

It made her shrink back a little deeper into the musty shadows of the vehicle, sprayed her over with a fine tremor of uneasiness.

At the crossing of Forty-Second Street and Sixth Avenue—a corner which, as she remembered it, was forever slimy and black, however clean and bright the rest of the city might be—the taxi came to a halt to let the north and south-bound traffic pass. An open automobile with four or five young bloods in the body of it drew up close to the taxi and also stopped.

"Hello, kid," said one of the boys, peering into the taxi.

He had a broad and good-natured, not overly intelligent face; but Viola Swan felt as she might have felt had she found herself confronted by a devil. She recognised the type—the type of the human puppy, heavy of paw and awkward of movement, which plays with a butterfly. The companions of the boy who had spoken sought to pull him back into the car. He resisted.

"You're some queen, birdie! Listen——"

A whistle sounded. The taxi jerked softly into motion. The other car swept on.

On through Forty-Second Street the taxi trod its way, closer and closer to that centre of the Beauty-Mart, where the day-shift was now going off, the night-shift coming on.

The whole gigantic spectacle of it flooded in upon Viola Swan as if through other channels than the sense of sight.

She saw the multitude of faces, each face a mask, many of them painted; but, painted or not, a mask graven to the lineaments of joy and prosperity, of bright expectation and overwhelming good luck.

"Masks! Masks!" she said.

And again:

"That's the quality of this street. I had forgotten it, I guess. But the thing is to look as if you were happy, or famous, or both, whatever might be gnawing at your heart—or your stomach."

The sky-signs flamed and danced, wriggled and volcanoed—one of the seven and seventy wonders of the modern world; but the human floods torrented this way and that and gave no apparent attention. To Viola Swan herself there was only one element of the colossal dis-

play which caught her attention. It was the dial of an enormous clock outlined in electric lights and framed with a red proclamation to the effect that it was high time to drink a highball.

But the clock was running. The indicated hour was correct.

Seven forty-five!

Twelve hours ago Jessie Schofield's train had arrived. What had happened to Jessie in this interval? Where was she now? Would her own quest for the missing girl be brief or long? In the meantime, what would Rufus think? Would his love for her and, above all, his faith in her, resist this assault upon them?

She gave a little gasp.

Yes!

In him—and in herself—her own faith was so deep that she had never paused to consider any other possibility. Nor did she now. But some gleam of the pure and pallid sky came to her as of something so remote from all that lay about her—as remote as the music of the Unadilla itself—that it was as if she had had a glimpse of the very face of that youth who had married her.

Up from the taxi jolting into Seventh Avenue from Forty-Second Street, and up from the crowded turmoil of clangour and pretense, her spirit fled. For a few moments there it was as if she and Rufus were alone, locked in each other's arms.

Rufus understood.

The taxi swung into a darker region. It went a little slower. It came to the Street of Strange Smells.

Nothing had changed. The street remained as indifferent to her return as it must have been to her departure.

It was always indifferent. How often she had noticed this!

In the old days, when this was all that was left to her of "her own, her native land"—then had it paid no more attention to her own particular tragedy than it might give to the passage of a seventy-five-dollar funeral.

There were the Chinese restaurant, the Cuban cigar-factory, the costumer's shop with its tawdry display of royal robes. There were the row of slatternly boarding-houses, the delicatessen store, the laundry, the French dyer's, the—

The taxi slid in toward the sidewalk and stopped at the curb.

Viola Swan gave one glance at the ground-glass door with its circlet of red panes—like the red rim of an old and watchful eye. But one glance was all she did give just then.

She felt that she would never have the strength to go on if she permitted herself to begin to think and look too much just then—while she still had the taxi there to help her to flee, while she still was free from Mrs. Moss's lethal touch.

She read the taxi-dial, and paid the chauffeur. He swung his car about and trundled off to the street's indifference.

But for several seconds Viola Swan stood there on the curb where the chauffeur had left her. Her suit-case was on the pavement at her side. Back of her, like a rational entity—watchful, cruel, waiting for her and sure of her ultimate fate—Mrs. Moss's house stared at her with its red-rimmed eyes.

"Come in! You might as well come in!"

So had it spoken to her a little more than a year ago. She could hear it saying the same thing now.

She sought to reason with herself. The house was respectable enough. Hadn't Mrs. Moss herself declared the fact over and over again? And, whatever Alec Breen's shortcomings, Alec certainly worked hard enough, and was honest enough in his own way; yet Alec had found this house a satisfactory home. Moreover, as she knew from experience, Mrs. Moss had had other tenants equally respectable—a vaudeville couple and three hard-working chorus-girls.

Viola Swan, a decision reached, picked up her suitcase and fled across the sidewalk to the waiting door.

She rang Mrs. Moss's bell, then entered the familiar lobby where her own bell and letter-box had been.

The lobby had a smell of its own—of dry dust tinctured with some hint of synthetic perfume. This air was like a whiff of chloroform to her. It made her slightly giddy and a little sick. She looked at her former letter-box. In the tiny square which once contained the name of "Viola Swan" there was now a soiled slip of paper bearing the two words: "Manicure—Massage."

Without warning, the door opened. There blinked up at her a face with pale and staring eyes, a bulbous nose, a mouth that slowly extended—more and more, past all belief—into a grin of recognition.

"Dearie!"

"Hello, Mrs. Moss!"

"So it's really you! My little Viola Swan!"

"Not Viola!—but Alice Linn—Mrs. Rufus Underwood!"

"Lord bless your sweet self whatever name you're going under!" Mrs. Moss exuberated reverently.

She clasped the visitor in arms which were singularly strong for a woman of her age, especially one who never took any exercise in the open air; pressed her visitor to her flabby bosom and bestowed upon her a kiss which was like the crawling contact of a snail.

## Chapter VIII

### THE LOCKED DOOR

MRS. MOSS'S quarters at the rear of the hall had changed no more than the street had done.

In the centre of the sitting-room was the table with the red cotton cover. A little to one side of it was the rocking-chair. Other chairs were scattered about—all more or less dilapidated. Against one wall was a writing-desk where Mrs. Moss performed her clerical labours and kept her accounts. On the wall itself were various lithographs, advertisements chiefly, and a few coloured photographs of ladies showing their stockings and smoking cigarettes.

From this room was visible the alcove which, by courtesy, might have been called a bedroom; likewise the noisome cavern which, by courtesy, became a kitchen.

“Set down,” said Mrs. Moss.

There was a sort of scurrying cordiality about Mrs. Moss. Viola Swan had never seen her less phlegmatic.

Viola sat down on the edge of the rocking-chair, cast a startled glance in the direction of the window which blindly stared out on the dirty white of the airless air-shaft and cast another startled glance all about her.

“You’re a little fatter than you was and twice as good looking,” Mrs. Moss flattered her. “There ain’t no use talking, a little vacation picks you right up when you get run down. And then, when a girl looks nice and

healthy like you, she can make more money in a day than a lot of these here limp-as-a-dishrag girls can make in a week. That's what I keep telling them. 'No wonder you don't bring down the coin,' I says; 'you look like a consumptive!' I suppose you'll be after those old rooms of yours. I was just thinking about you this afternoon—how glad I'd be to have you back."

Viola Swan shrank back at hearing herself thus addressed. Out of the shadows of herself Mrs. Rufus Underwood emerged.

"I've come here to get Jessie Schofield and take her home," she said. "You know—Alec Breen's young friend. I hope that no harm has come to her."

Mrs. Moss had discovered that the key of her writing-desk wasn't properly inserted in the lock. She managed to fix the key, but only at the expense of considerable effort. Her smile was still on her face as she turned. She hadn't quite understood.

"What's that, dearie?"

Little Mrs. Underwood repeated what she had said, making an effort to show no trace of the excitement throbbing in her breast.

"What did you say the name was?" Mrs. Moss asked.

"Jessie Schofield!"

"I never heard of her, Viola."

"Do you mean to say that Alec Breen never mentioned her to you?"

Mrs. Moss reverted somewhat to classical form.

"You know me, Viola. I run a nice respectable apartment-house. That's me. I ain't give to inquiring about the friends and the affairs of none of my tenants. When you was here, did you ever have to kick about me inquiring the names of your gentlemen friends?"

"This is different. Jessie Schofield is a child. To some extent I feel responsible for her. If I didn't I shouldn't be here now. We might as well be frank about this thing, Mrs. Moss. I've come to New York to get Jessie Schofield and take her home. I'll turn heaven and earth to do this. And I'll turn heaven and earth," she added, speaking more slowly, "to see that some one suffers if she's been injured in any way."

Mrs. Moss swam over to the glass door looking out into the hall. She stood there peering out for a dozen seconds.

"Just set here and make yourself comfortable for a moment," Mrs. Moss whispered. "I just see that frowzy manicure come in with a pint of beer in a tin bucket. I'll settle her hash. I've told her this was a respectable house."

She disappeared through the door with a speed little short of amazing, also a perfect silence.

Mrs. Underwood sat in the rocking-chair unable to think, inactive save for a strained but idle expectancy of some sort of an outbreak from the hall. But from the hall no sound came.

Gradually, Mrs. Underwood faded, and it was the personality of Viola Swan which emerged instead. It was Viola Swan who suspected some trick, suspected that Mrs. Moss had lied. It was Viola Swan who got up from the chair and ran silently toward the door.

Too late!

Mrs. Moss herself was just returning and it was she who opened the door. At sight of Viola Swan Mrs. Moss clapped a hand to her breast as one might who is short of breath.

"She run up the stairs," panted Mrs. Moss; "and now she's went and spilt enough suds on the carpet to keep

the place stunk up for another month. I never see such a girl. She ain't got any more sense of decency than a cockroach!"

"I thought I heard you call `me," said Viola Swan, explaining her own presence at the door.

"That was me bawling out the manicure," said Mrs. Moss, slyly. "Now, what was it you was saying about this—what was her name—Bessie?"

Viola Swan didn't answer immediately. She had started back in the direction of the rocking-chair, and now came to a wilting stop; and turning, flashed her eyes upon Mrs. Moss in a scrutiny which that good woman hadn't in the least expected. Mrs. Moss's only recourse was to smile. But that smile might have meant anything—from murder to harmless lunacy.

"Viola," Mrs. Moss mumbled from the midst of her smile, "I declare that now that I see you here again I feel almost as if you was my own daughter. I always did feel affectionate to you."

"Then, help me," said the girl. "I'm in need of help, and you can help me. I know that this child has had her head turned by something that Alec Breen told her. You know that Alec was up in our part of the country on his vacation."

"I thought he was down in Long Island some place," said Mrs. Moss with a blank look.

"Well, he wasn't. He came up to Chenango County. He took this child for a ride. Heaven only knows what he might have told her."

"Alec couldn't never fool no woman without she was insane."

"This wasn't a woman. It was a child. I'm going to take your word for it that she isn't here. I'm going down to his restaurant. I know where it is."

Mrs. Moss had an inspiration.

"He may have snuk her in here," said Mrs. Moss.  
"Suppose we go up there and have a look."

Viola sat down. She knew that if Jessie Schofield was in Alec's little flat, Mrs. Moss would be aware of the fact. If Mrs. Moss suggested that they go upstairs it must have been for some ulterior purpose of Mrs. Moss's own. But Mrs. Moss's mental movements were sagacious and cunning, hard to follow. Now she was talking again.

"It's God's own truth what I've been telling you, Viola," she declared in apparent recognition of her visitor's trouble. "I can sympathise with you. Don't I know? Why, scarcely a day goes by but that some of them young detectives from headquarters—nice young boys they are, too, and good spenders; useful friends for any girl to have—a friendly tip for you, Viola—what was I saying? Oh, yes! Scarcely a day goes by but what they're up here asking my advice about the day's batch of missing girls. An awful sight of girls skip out, Viola; a raff of them! And I can't say that I blame them very much either. They got a right to get some sweetness out of life."

"Poor little fools!" said Viola Swan. "They'd be better dead."

"That's what I'm telling you," Mrs. Moss agreed. "The boys from headquarters know that them's my sentiments. You wouldn't see me letting a girl waste her chances. No siree! She ought to be—"

"At home!"

"—with some one who's got enough sense to see that she gets what's coming to her. There!" exclaimed Mrs. Moss. "Here I am gassing away like an old wind-bag, and you all tuckered out. If I was you I wouldn't go down to Alec's to-night. Besides, he was just telling

me about his having been transferred over to Hoboken or somewhere.

"If I was you I'd stay right here until he comes home in the morning; and then me and you can surprise him like. I'll settle his hash if he's been doing any dirty tricks. He knows I won't have nothing like that on my premises."

"What time does he come home now?"

"Never later than two or three," Mrs. Moss lied, after due reflection. "I know, because when I hear him I knock on the floor for Jo down in the cellar to look at the fires. Alec's my clock."

"I'll wait for him here," said Viola Swan. "I'm tired. I don't know which way to turn."

"When you don't know which way to turn, turn in," Mrs. Moss advised. "You take off your shoes and your corsets, too. Go in and lay down on my bed while I make a little sassafras tea. I bet you know what sassafras tea is, you being a country girl."

"I remember my mother making it when I was a little girl."

"Well, you just let Mother Moss be your ma for a while," the landlady suggested amiably. "Go ahead! Take off your things. You may need such strength as you've got. You might as well freshen up a bit."

Mrs. Moss retreated into her kitchen.

There was no questioning the soundness of the advice she had just given. Mechanically, Viola took off her hat. She scraped her low shoes from her small feet with a familiar movement, and loosened her stays. It would be three or four hours yet before Alec came home. Even the dubious hospitality Mrs. Moss offered her seemed attractive when she thought of the streets through which

she had so often walked at this time of night, fearful, not always alone.

"Go right in and stretch yourself out a bit," Mrs. Moss called from the kitchen. "I'm going to mother you a little. It'll do you good."

Viola did so. Dressed as she was she went into the alcove, and letting down her hair, threw herself back on the bed and composed herself to think.

"Drink this," said Mrs. Moss, through the twilight.

Viola took the cup. The concoction was steaming, but not too hot. She sipped it.

As she did so, it was as if the form of the old landlady became the uplifted head and neck of a mighty serpent there to destroy her—there to destroy all goodness in the world, all faith in human kindness.

It was sassafras tea. She recognised the pungent fragrance of it. But with that sip she had taken her brain recorded a second perception.

Chloral!

## Chapter IX

### IN OTHER HANDS

IT'S delicious," said Viola Swan. "I'll drink it all, but let me take my time. I want to sip it. After that I think I'll sleep. But I hate so much to bother you!"

"No bother, dearie," said Mrs. Moss. "I'll just slip into the front flat and borrow an extra pillow. Don't let your tea get cold. I'll be right back."

The phantasm of the serpent disappeared.

As it did so Viola Swan sat up. One thing had become perfectly clear to her the moment she discovered Mrs. Moss's treachery. Jessie Schofield must have been right here in the house after all. For no other reason would Mrs. Moss have resorted to what the landlady and her kind called "knockout drops."

Jessie here in the house! What was to be done? Action, before it was too late.

She ran out into the sitting-room, looked into the kitchen. As she had suspected, she was all alone. Viola gave a glance at the place where she had left her shoes. It did not surprise her greatly that they were no longer there. She had heard many queer stories and hints of queer deeds in the days before Rufus appeared.

She went over to the door leading into the hall and tried it.

The door was locked.

Mrs. Moss, having locked her door, had scuttled up the

hall to the front flat. Her speed almost took her breath away. She knocked, listened a moment, then called:

“Lilly!”

The woman who opened the door was younger than Mrs. Moss—not much, so far as years were concerned, perhaps; but younger by the grace of cosmetics, better clothes, and greater care of herself. Those hours which some women spend in front of their mirrors are not lost. They’re merely put on deposit, to be drawn on as the fund of youth runs out. Lilly showed signs of having put many such hours on deposit.

There were shadows and wrinkles enough about her shrewd, hard eyes, but the broad surfaces of her face were creamed and powdered and rouged to a quality resembling that of enamel. She was slender, too, and very erect, which always helps a lot; neatly, almost richly, but soberly dressed, and she smiled, yet with a trace of excitement as she admitted Mrs. Moss. At once the meaning of what she had seen in Mrs. Moss’s face was clear. Her question was merely for confirmation.

“All right?”

Mrs. Moss answered with a glance. Lilly closed the door and locked it.

Jessie Schofield came forward. Jessie was dressed for the street and appeared to have been greatly refreshed. She also was excited, but it wasn’t the same sort of excitement Lilly had shown.

“Oh, Mrs. Moss,” Jessie exclaimed; “Mrs. Spencer’s promised me the grandest time. Can’t you come with us?”

Mrs. Moss, in answer, grinned knowingly at Lilly Spencer.

“I guess I’m too old to have any more grand times,”

she averred, "although I don't feel it. I feel just as young as I ever did."

So much Mrs. Moss said for Jessie's benefit. After that she whispered, without apology, frankly saying things which she didn't care to have Jessie hear. With equal frankness Mrs. Spencer whispered her replies.

"It was her," whispered Mrs. Moss. "You remember the other little rube—the good-looking one! The one I tried to get to stay with you—Viola Swan! Speak easy! The kid here says to me that she doesn't know her; but they're friends, all right, and Viola's come here to find her. That's why I tipped you off a while ago to keep under cover."

"What's she up to? Trouble?"

"I guess she won't make no one any trouble for a while. I give her the—stuff that makes you sleep."

"What if she—?"

"I know the dose."

"—makes a bawl and gets me into trouble?"

"She don't even know that the kid come to me. She merely thought so. There won't be nothing to prove it by the time she wakes up. You should worry! But you won't forget that I done you the favour of letting you have the kid, will you, Lilly? You and her had better beat it. When'll I hear from you?"

"You know me, Lettie," Mrs. Spencer replied. "You and me are about the only ones out of the old mob that's left."

Jessie Schofield, with only a part of her interest concentrated on the coloured photograph of one of the ladies smoking a cigarette, judged from the pause in the whispering that a moment had come when she might again be admitted to a share in whatever it was that was

going on. She turned to look at the older ladies, and found them already looking in her direction.

"You can make something of her, Lilly," said Mrs. Moss, this time loud enough for Jessie to hear. "She's a smart girl. I hate to see her go. Before this morning we never set eyes on each other; and yet I feel myself loving her as if she was my own daughter. Don't you sort of hate to leave your old Mother Moss yourself, pet?" She inquired of Jessie.

"Yes, and I'm going to come to see you," said Jessie. "I think that you and Mrs. Spencer both are just as lovely as you can be."

"Has Mrs. Spencer told you everything?" Mrs. Moss asked.

"She's told me that she's been looking for some girl who can be a sort of daughter to her," Jessie confessed; "and she's told me all about the nice place she lives in, and the clothes she's going to buy for me, and everything like that."

"Jessie," Mrs. Moss explained, turning to Mrs. Spencer, "is too good a girl to throw herself away on the first rube that comes along. That was what I was telling her. She says that she agrees with me, but I reckon you'll have to sort of keep an eye on her. You know how girls are when they get stuck on some hard-boiled egg who ain't got nothing but a line of talk."

"You won't have to keep an eye on me," Jessie laughed; "not on Mr. Breen's account. He's never stirred my passion. Not in the least! And less than ever, now that Mrs. Spencer has told me all about the perfectly gorgeous times that we are to have together."

Lilly Spencer slipped one of her trim arms about Jessie's rather ample waist.

Mrs. Moss padded over to the door and listened.

"What is the excitement?" Jessie asked.

"Little girls hadn't ought to ask questions," said Mrs. Spencer archly.

Mrs. Moss returned.

"I thought I heard the door-bell," she enlightened them.

"Maybe it was Mr. Breen," Jessie suggested.

"Now let me tell you something about Mr. Breen," Mrs. Moss took up the thread sagely. "Mind you, pet, I ain't saying a word against him. I consider Alec Breen one of the nicest young gentlemen I know of—and I've known a lot of them in my day. Haven't I, Lilly? So has Mrs. Spencer; and she'll tell you, like me, that I know what I'm talking about. Alec's a hard-working young man. One of these days he'll have a raff of money. I ain't saying that he ain't. He's that kind. He's a money-grubber. But, just as yet, he's a hard-boiled egg."

"Is that what you call a man who works in a restaurant?" Jessie asked brightly.

Mrs. Moss and Mrs. Spencer exchanged a brief smile.

"I'm it," Jessie confessed. "I suppose that both of you think that I'm an awful come-on."

Mrs. Spencer gave Jessie an affectionate hug.

"Mrs. Moss merely means," she put in, "that this friend of yours ain't generous—that he ain't the kind that opens wine."

"And what I'm getting at," Mrs. Moss herself elucidated, "is that no young girl that respects herself, and that's ambitious, and that wants to get a little of the sweetness out of life, hadn't ought to throw herself away on a young fellow just because he's nice and a hard worker, even if he is going to be rich. His turn'll come later, when he is rich. But a girl 'd be a fool to take a

chance when there's so many gentlemen ready right off to show her a good time. Lilly, am I right or am I wrong?"

"You don't have to ask me to make Jessie believe you," Mrs. Spencer declared. "Does she, chick?"

"I should say not," Jessie answered.

"I'm glad she's got some sense," said Mrs. Moss, relieved. "But for twenty years and more now I've been trying to ding the same thing into some girls' heads. I've put them in the way of meeting gentlemen who was affectionate and generous—rich gentlemen, regular swells! And what would they do? Before you knew it along would come some young squirt—"

"Dearie," Mrs. Spencer interrupted her, "I think that I and Jessie had better dust."

"I guess you'd better," Mrs. Moss agreed. "Just to make it a safe bet you and her'd better go over in the direction of Eighth Avenue. You'll find a taxi over there, all right, and there's less chance of your meeting some one, in case of—"

"Anyway, it's understood. If any one asks, you didn't see me, and I didn't see you."

"No; nor telephoned!"

Jessie had listened to the latter part of the conversation with no pretense of having understood. She found the whole adventure, from the very moment of her arrival in Mrs. Moss's house, deliciously mysterious anyway; so mysterious, so different from anything she had hitherto experienced, that nothing that could have been said or done just then would have surprised her greatly.

What had become of Alec Breen? His continued absence didn't worry her greatly. She agreed in part with the sentiments which Mrs. Moss had just expressed; but there was another element in her thought which com-

pleted her tranquillity. She hadn't told Mrs. Moss so, but she knew perfectly well where Alec had his restaurant. In case she should want to see Alec, in case things should not turn out quite as well as she hoped, there would always be time to look Alec up.

She associated it with Mrs. Moss's desire to keep her out of Alec's society—albeit the connection wasn't quite clear—when Mrs. Moss, warning them to remain where they were for a moment, preceded them out into the musty hall and turned out the flickering gaslight there.

"Now beat it," whispered Mrs. Moss, returning to the door; "and don't make no noise."

Jessie, carrying her suit-case, took enough time, in spite of the atmosphere of cautious haste which suddenly surrounded them, to press the flabby old form of Mrs. Moss to her, to press a kiss on Mrs. Moss's flabby cheek.

"Come on, chick," whispered the elegant Mrs. Spencer.

She caught Jessie's free wrist in a hand which had something about it suggestive of the remorseless grip of a steel handcuff. Together they scurried across the brief zone of darkness to the dimly seen translucency of the front door. They were nothing but twin shadows as the door let them pass. Like shadows they disappeared.

Then Mrs. Moss bubbled an oath, loud enough for some one to hear if some one happened to be listening in her own flat at the back of the hall.

"That durn gas-jet's always doing that on me," she panted.

She listened. Perhaps it was because she thus found herself in the darkness and the solitude so abruptly; but Mrs. Moss experienced a slight twinge of fear which wasn't altogether pleasant, which she couldn't quite explain. It was something like conscience; like that vague thing some persons call premonition.

## Chapter X

### A CALL FOR HELP

MRS. MOSS lurked there in the gloom trying to reassure herself. In her own way she was a good psychologist—shrewd, skilled in all the craft of her vocation. An old specialist she was.

She knew the symptoms and reactions of that toxin of the Old Tenderloin with which she had seen in her time the thousands inoculated. To her it was inconceivable that there had been any essential change in Viola Swan. And even if there had!

“I’ve got her now,” mused Mrs. Moss.

The thought drifted out from her like a waver of slime.

But suppose that Viola hadn’t drunk that tea that had been prepared for her. That would be just like her—the snip!

Or suppose that the chloral hadn’t been of the requisite strength? Druggists were always playing tricks like that, here in the Old Tenderloin. It was almost so bad that a self-respecting girl—calling for some deadly drug and receiving from the chemist instead some concoction which would merely make her ill—“couldn’t even suicide nowadays,” as Mrs. Moss was wont to say.

Still, even if these suppositions turned out to be the truth, even if Viola had got out of bed and discovered that the door was locked, what could she do without her shoes?

That was the final triumph of Mrs. Moss's psychology, the one which finally banished her whiff of alarm. She sagged over to a corner of the hall, pawed out the shoes she had hidden there—small and shapely shoes—Viola's.

Mrs. Moss spat at them.

Into her evil old face came a look of sensual indulgence. She smiled. She wavered there.

Then, once more, some undefined quiver of alarm was slowly spreading itself through the unwholesome gelatin of her ancient nerves. She wondered why; wondered if she had made some mistake.

“She’s in the house!” Viola Swan whispered to herself. “Jessie Schofield is here in the house!”

The fumes from the drugged sassafras steamed slowly up from the cup which she still held in her hand. Viola herself was like one of those old sibyls, drawing prophecy from a poisonous vapour. She saw the truth. Only to keep her out of the way until Jessie could be made to disappear had Mrs. Moss been driven to use her knock-out drops.

Viola listened.

She was alone. Mrs. Moss’s own quarters and the rest of the house were steeped in a sort of haunted silence.

Over in the corner of the small bed-room there was a stationary washstand with running water. After a brief glance into the sitting-room to make doubly sure that she was alone Viola went over to the washstand and emptied the cup into it. She brought this back and placed it on a commode at the side of the bed.

Inoculated with the toxin of the Old Tenderloin, she herself was shrewd when need be. Much of what the Old Tenderloin had to teach she had learned—learned it

with distress, with revolt, but learned it well none the less.

Self-preservation and preservation of the purpose which had brought her to New York inspired her and sharpened her faculties.

She was locked in and her shoes were gone.

Still she might escape easily enough.

But what then?

There indeed was where Mrs. Moss's psychology had all but triumphed.

Viola recognised this. What would she do without her shoes? Run for a policeman? Any one else would think that she was crazy—running through the street in her stocking feet. And even a policeman would want to know how it came that she had taken off her shoes in such a place. He would want her to come to the station and explain things to the sergeant.

Worst of all—and it was this that caused her to snuff out the sputtering fuse of the potential bomb in her brain—some one at the station, even that first policeman to whom she appealed, might remember her as one who had walked through this street less than a year ago, one who had “walked in darkness.”

Mrs. Moss's precautions were thus almost perfect. There was just one thing which Mrs. Moss had forgotten—if, indeed, she would have considered it of sufficient importance to bother about even if she had thought of it.

She had forgotten the telephone.

Only a few seconds had elapsed since Viola's discovery that the door was locked, that her shoes were gone. During those few seconds she had devoted herself to a concentration of thought which amounted to passion and approximated prayer.

Her eyes flashed upon the telephone almost as if in response to a friendly voice. She saw it as something friendly, eager to help.

The telephone!

What was that number Pennington had given her?

She made a scrambling search for her pocket. But, even before her fingers came in contact with Pennington's card she had visualised it and was calling the Gotham Club.

"Gotham Club!" came a mild and cheerful voice.

"I wish to speak to Mr. Pennington—Mr. Josiah Pennington."

"Who shall I say, please?"

"Mrs. Underwood," Viola answered.

She was panting against the loss of seconds which convention demanded. It had never been so clear to her before that conventions were not invented for moments of stress.

"I shall see," came the neatly modulated voice, "if Mr. Pennington is here. Hold the wire, madam."

More seconds flickered out. They were seconds measured in heart-beats by Viola. She was listening—at the telephone, and for the return of Mrs. Moss, and for whatever other sound might come to her from beyond the glass-panelled door. There came to her only the strained confusion of the noises from the street—the clamour of children who should have been in bed, the heavy rumble of a brewer's truck, the screeching explosions of a passing auto with the muffler cut out, the enveloping drone of the city at large.

There was a click at the other end of the wire.

"Mr. Pennington is not in the building, madam. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Not in the building! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, madam."

"I must find him. It's important. Where is he?"

"I regret, madam——"

"Listen!" Viola pleaded. She felt that the measured propriety of the man at the Gotham Club would drive her insane. "Listen! This is a matter of life and death. I must find Mr. Pennington. He's a friend of mine. He's the only friend I have in New York!"

She was still obsessed with the idea that Pennington must be in the club. She needed him so! She heard the man at the Gotham Club say something about a private number which Mr. Pennington did not permit the man to communicate even to Mr. Pennington's most intimate friends. Still, if she thought——

Viola remembered the telephone number which Pennington himself had penciled on his card. Even now in the midst of all her mental and spiritual turmoil it gave her a little gust of encouragement, of crinkling warmth, that he had entrusted her with a secret so carefully guarded.

She hung up the receiver and looked at the card. Once more she was calling Central——

There was a click, a buzz . . .

"Well? Who is it?" came the voice—feminine, insolent, lazy.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Pennington," Viola panted.

"Who gave you this number?"

"It's a matter of the utmost importance," Viola pleaded in a small voice. Every instant now she was expecting the door to open, Mrs. Moss to appear. "Please call Mr. Pennington!"

"Who is this speaking?" The voice was increasingly petulant.

"Tell him that it's Mrs. Underwood. He'll understand."

A fresh wave of desperation was beginning to surge in upon Viola. She had heard the front door slam.

The succeeding silence held a menace—Viola did not know what—somewhat as if a monster might be crouching in the darkness. When would there spring from the silence some sound she dreaded, the return of Mrs. Moss, a sob from Jessie? What was happening? Why had Mrs. Moss sought to drug her—make her a prisoner?"

"Yes," the voice at the other end of the wire was saying; "but I don't understand. I never heard of you. How do you happen to have my telephone number?"

"Oh, please—please!"

"I think that you've made a mistake," came the voice.

Then a very peculiar thing happened. There was a sudden muting of the voice, as if the possessor of it had clapped her hand over the transmitter of the instrument. It was in these muted accents that the next words came:

"It is nothing, sweetheart. Don't bother!"

"It is everything!" thrilled Viola. "Call him! Call him! It was he himself who gave me the number. Call him before it is too late. I beg of you—"

At the other end of the line some sort of a dispute seemed to be taking place. There was a confusion of two voices, unintelligible save that they were momentarily becoming more and more earnest. There was a jerking thud, as of a receiver being dropped or dashed aside. Once more the woman's voice became articulate.

"I won't have her calling you up here, whoever she is!"

So much, then Viola was hearing the calm, measured tones she had been praying for—Pennington's voice.

"Hello! Who is it?"

"Viola Swan! At that address you gave the chauffeur. I'm a prisoner—in danger! Everything's in danger!"

"I understand." His next words, plainly, were not for her, for Pennington followed this up with: "There, there, Julia; it's just as I expected." There was a pause, then Pennington was speaking into the instrument again. "I'll be right over. Good-bye!"

Viola almost reeled.

Just now it had almost been as if she had a friend there in the room with her, face to face. Once more she was alone, baffled, all but defenceless. Her very situation spurred her to make the most of whatever privacy might be left to her. It couldn't be so very long now before Mrs. Moss returned.

She listened. Still that silence with the terror lurking in it! Viola Swan had always listened like that.

The rooms seemed darker than before—a mere mental effect, perhaps; an illusion of impending danger. This part of the town had always impressed her as a place of clouds and fogs, of pestilential miasmas adrift to obscure the vision of one's soul.

She would have to return to the bed, be there when Mrs. Moss again appeared. Cunning against cunning, wile *versus* guile—that was the law essential to existence here.

But suddenly she shuddered. She couldn't lie there unarmed. Presently the dragon that lurked in the silence would come out.

What then?

She glanced about her, swiftly, a prey to anguish. The door of Mrs. Moss's kitchen held her attention.

She circled the table, with its red cotton cover glowing dimly in the light of a wan chandelier above it. It was

dark in the kitchen—almost completely dark—and the atmosphere of it was dank, a reek which urged her to almost panic haste.

But she found something in the nature of what she sought. This was a cheap little potato-knife, but strong and trenchant.

She slipped it into the bosom of her dress.

## Chapter XI

### UNDER FALSE PRETENCES

**S**HE was lying on the bed in the alcove there where Mrs. Moss had left her—when Mrs. Moss returned.

The knife was hidden in her blouse. It lay there against her breast, like the materialisation of a dawning resolve which she herself did not as yet distinctly recognise. It was some vague idea of defence—defence not only of herself but of Jessie; perhaps not only of herself and Jessie, but of other girls who might stray into Mrs. Moss's web.

She didn't have to act, but simply lay there on the bed like a young mother, this idea of hers just born—something created entirely from her martyred flesh and aspiring soul, coddled against her bosom.

She didn't have to open her eyes to see. Every nerve in her body was keyed up to the point of perception.

She knew it when Mrs. Moss came softly to the side of the bed and looked down at her, knew it when Mrs. Moss picked up the empty teacup from the dresser and smelled of it. She could almost see, even with her eyes closed, the expression that was on Mrs. Moss's face as she once more returned to the bed and put out a hand.

Mrs. Moss was going to see if her visitor's heart was beating all right. One might as well be on the safe side.

No landlady liked—even a suicide on the premises.

Now, if Mrs. Moss touched the knife—Viola wondered—what then? For Viola somehow felt that it wasn't her own volition which was going to direct matters when the crisis came, but the volition of this still vague thing to which she had given birth.

But Mrs. Moss's hand missed the knife. Her fingers rested clammily for a few moments on Viola's breast; and she must have been reassured, for Viola herself could feel her own heart pound while the fingers were there.

Mrs. Moss went away.

Viola could hear her pottering around out in the sitting-room. She could hear the old woman mutter things—inarticulate, groping sounds as ghostly as those made by certain fish at night against the bottom of a skiff.

Would Pennington come? And what then?

Viola sought to think. But her thoughts were absorbed like water in sand, and the sand was a featureless waiting. It was almost as if she did sleep—the sort of sleep which would have been her portion had she drunk the chloral.

For some time now there had been almost a complete silence—as complete as ever falls over the central region of Manhattan, with the street-cars and elevated trains throbbing and rumbling in the distance, the hoot of automobile-horns, the murmurs and squeaks, songs and groans, laughters and howls of the herd. Then there came the shrill of a bell directly over Viola's head.

She knew it. This was the bell rung from the outer door of the house.

She knew more than that. There was probably only one person in the world who would be ringing this bell like that at this time of the night, and that person was Josiah Pennington.

"I'd like to see—Viola Swan," said Pennington, looking down at Mrs. Moss.

She stared up at him obliquely, as one might who is not quite sure that she has heard aright; or, possibly, is not quite sure but that the speaker is drunk or otherwise out of his senses.

Mrs. Moss took note of the taxi panting at the curb. She took note of the visitor's dinner-jacket. She mulled over in her mind these and other facts. Who was he? How did he happen to be there? How did it come that he should be inquiring for Viola Swan, of all persons, precisely when Viola was ostensibly dead to the world?

"What did you say the name was?" Mrs. Moss inquired.

"Viola Swan!"

There was no mistaking that touch of asperity in his voice.

"I guess there must be some mistake," said Mrs. Moss.

Pennington cast a glance at the number painted on the transom.

"You listen to me," he said abruptly. "There isn't any mistake, and you know there isn't. Do you want me to send that taxi around to the nearest police-station for assistance?"

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed Mrs. Moss; but she was frightened, all right.

It was the feeling of magic that frightened her more than anything else—the feeling that she was in the presence of something which she couldn't understand at all. It recalled to her, with a whiff of chill, that little premonition, or whatever it was, she had experienced in the hall only a few minutes ago after Lilly Spencer had gone away with Jessie Schofield.

"Look at the names over the letter-boxes," Mrs. Moss advised, in the quest of leisure to think.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, and I insist upon an immediate answer," said Pennington. He half turned, as if to make good his threat to send the chauffeur to the police-station.

"Hold on," said Mrs. Moss, smiling and plucking at his sleeve. "Step in a minute. No use advertising your troubles to the neighbours."

"Of course not," Pennington agreed.

"This is a respectable place, and I don't want no one to think different," Mrs. Moss went on, as soon as she and Pennington were in the hall with the door closed behind them. "I done a friendly act, and here I've went and got myself into a mess. I don't know who you are, but you're a nice-looking young gentleman. Listen to me.

"I'm older than you are. You're probably bent on a kind act, too. I could size you up the moment I opened the door. Kindness is all right. I ain't saying that it ain't. You can ask every one here in the neighbourhood—ministers, politicians, storekeepers, landlords—and they'll all tell you that I am pure gold when it comes to kindness. But I'm just telling you, kindness will get you into a mess every time, quicker than sin."

"I came here to find Viola Swan," said Pennington.

"So you told me," Mrs. Moss replied, with a glint of evil.

"Well, where is she?"

"Now that we understand each other, that's what I'd call a fair question deserving a fair answer. Viola Swan ain't her name and never was her name, but I guess I know who you mean all right. You guessed it. She's here."

"Take me to her."

"Not so fast! I got to set myself right first. I suppose you know that the girl is a dope-fiend."

"I don't."

"Well, you've got a lot to learn—be it said to your credit! I befriended her before this, more than once. She come here again early this evening. She was no sooner in the house than she begun to shake. You know how they are when they've been kept away from the hop. 'Set down,' I says. 'Oh, Mrs. Moss,' she says; 'you're the only friend I got.'"

"I'd rather hear all that from the young lady herself," Pennington declared.

"Yes, and you've got a fat chance," spluttered Mrs. Moss, beginning to lose patience.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's dead to the world; that's what I mean, and you'd have knowed it before this if you'd have let me go on with what I was telling you."

"Go on, then!"

"She set there in my rocking-chair, just like I was telling you; and she begun to cry and carry on about some fellow or other she was stuck on. You know how these girls are. They are rotten to the core—most of them! giving their money to Ralph one day, beating it with Fritzie the next, suiciding the third day for Alfred. She's no better than the others. Before I could stop her, she up and took a shot of the old stuff fit to lay out a horse."

"I don't believe you. Anyway, you'd better stop killing time. I've told the chauffeur out there that if I'm not back there on the sidewalk in twenty minutes to beat it on around to the police-station, anyway—tell them what he knows."

"How come you to do that?" Mrs. Moss inquired.

"That young lady," Pennington asserted, "telephoned to me a few minutes ago that she was being held in this house as a prisoner. Is that clear enough? I want to see her. I'm going to see her. I'll find out whether she's drugged or not."

Mrs. Moss laughed at him, poked at him with one of her fingers, went serious again as if out of respect for him.

"Say," she warned brazenly; "you ain't the only one. She's been telephoning to every friend she's got in town. She's always that way when she's took a shot of the old stuff. Does it in her sleep like. I know them. I've saw them when they were beginners, and I've saw them when they were far gone, like she is; but, honestly, I'm telling you this for your own good——"

"Look here, madam——"

"None of that, young man! Don't you call me no madam. I ain't no madam. I've told you this was a respectable place!"

"You don't understand!" It was clear that Pennington was assailed by a doubt—the doubt which any intelligent man with some experience of the world might have entertained in circumstances which were similar.

The girl was a former habitué of this street. She had told him as much herself. But out of his doubt there must have emerged some memory of her face, some echo of her voice.

"I don't believe you," he grated harshly.

For a darksome interval Mrs. Moss gazed up at Pennington with her round pale eyes and partly opened mouth. The look contained a curse if any look ever did.

"Have your own way," was all she said.

She turned and made her way back through the hall.

After all, she felt safe enough. There was no proof that the story she had told was not true. If the worst arrived, and the police were called in, it would be merely Viola Swan's word against her own, and she knew how far Viola Swan was likely to be trusted.

Mrs. Moss, from the sitting-room, watched Pennington sink into the shadows of the alcove. She saw him bend over the figure on the bed. She thought she heard some murmured interchange. She drew near, hoping to understand; but Pennington suddenly straightened up, faced about.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I should like you to leave us alone for a while."

Mrs. Moss hesitated.

There was no hesitation on Pennington's part as he abruptly left the bedside, drew out his wallet and extracted a bill. He pushed this toward Mrs. Moss. Her own hand flashed out. She deftly plucked the money from Pennington's fingers. She made a scurrying retreat through the door leading into the hall.

Mrs. Moss was still waiting for him out there a quarter of an hour later, when Pennington appeared again. She confronted him stealthily, leered up into his face.

"Well," she demanded, "what did Viola have to say for herself?"

Pennington had a movement of recoil—just as if he were afraid that she would touch him. The recoil was succeeded by an instant of swift reflection.

"What did she say?" he echoed.

Mrs. Moss grinned.

"Nothing," Pennington answered. "What could she say? The girl is unconscious."

Mrs. Moss continued to look at him in silence for a

few seconds longer—while her doubts melted away, their place to be taken by a multitude of unholy joys.

“What did I tell you?” she laughed. “They’re always like that. They run to dope. And she’s the limit, she is. Pretty, though, ain’t she? Listen! Whenever you want to see her again, don’t wait until she telephones. You just come here and let me know.”

Pennington was listening to her. He was grim but dispassionate.

“I thought you said this was a respectable place,” he ventured.

“It is,” flared Mrs. Moss in a thick whisper. “You won’t never have nothing to be afraid about—not in my house, you won’t. I don’t see things, I don’t. And I’m deef—deef as a post. But let a girl try any crooked business, or get fresh with a gentleman—Say, if Viola tries to come that on you, just tell your troubles to Mother Moss. I know her. I’ll make her come round. I’ll——”

The door slammed. Pennington was gone.

## Chapter XII

### TELEGRAMS

THE line of any man's duty is seldom clear. The general direction of it may be sufficiently well indicated by the signboards of custom, the advice of one's friends, the aphorisms gleaned from good books, the counsel of one's own conscience. But the cross-roads and by-paths of conduct are so numerous that almost every man is confused at times.

Josiah Pennington swiftly realised this as he stepped from Mrs. Moss's house and saw that there was another machine at the curb drawn up behind the taxi he had left there.

It was a car he recognised—a costly limousine, purple, with a liveried chauffeur on the seat, a liveried footman at the door of it. He recognised, moreover, the dimly seen occupant of the limousine—a woman dressed in white.

Pennington none the less realised the necessity for prompt action. There were the first elements of a crowd around the limousine—small and half-grown boys principally, yet with a fair sprinkling of elders, male and female, looking on from no great distance, ready to close in should the promise of excitement develop.

A car like that wouldn't stop in a street like this without some very special reason.

The chauffeur of Pennington's taxi read the dial, ac-

cepted the fare and the tip Pennington gave him, grated his own machine into stuttering speed with a grin and a muttered "Good night!" Without hesitation Pennington then turned to the limousine. The footman saluted, flung open the door.

"Home!" said Pennington.

He entered the car, and not until then did he face the lady already there.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, drawing away from him.

"Will you permit me to smoke a cigarette?" he asked calmly.

"I don't see why you should ask me," she panted, "when you've just shown yourself to be a double-faced hypocrite; when you've just debased me, insulted me, trampled on my self-respect, shown that you have no more consideration for me than if I was the last dog in the public pound!"

"Thanks, Julia," Pennington answered mildly, as he lighted his cigarette.

The car was rolling smoothly through the splotched darkness of the street. Even the lights and shadows gave the impression of something soiled. The atmosphere which came to them through the open windows of the car was fetid. The crowd, though, had been left behind. They were at liberty to talk it out.

"I suppose that you followed me there," he said.

"You needn't smirk about it," she reminded him savagely. "It was merely to save you the trouble of lying to me later on."

Pennington cast another glance at his companion. Julia was rather beautiful as a rule. Few women are beautiful all the time. That was more than he could expect. But he did not like to see that expression of rage and

senseless jealousy in her face. It made her positively ugly—as ugly as those words of hers.

"I'll forgive you that last remark of yours," he said, with a new note of gravity; "that is, I will if you'll listen to what I have to say and cast no aspersions on the truth of it."

"Nan-nan-na!" she mocked him nasally.

"That telephone message was perfectly genuine," said Pennington resignedly. "The girl who telephoned went to that vile house in search of a little country girl who has disappeared from a place up the State somewhere. The girl who telephoned, by the way, is a married woman."

"You're a fiend to throw that into my face," said Julia. "I suppose that since she's a married woman she is immeasurably superior to me! Oh, I could tear your eyes out!"

"You keep quiet," Pennington advised.

"That's right! Threaten me!" Julia panted.

Pennington laughed.

"The point I'm trying to make, Julia, is just this: The lady in question is very much in love with her husband, and I make not the slightest pretence in the world to cutting him out."

"No, you merely remain in her arms for an hour while I am forced to make a spectacle of myself out in the street waiting for you."

"As to that," Pennington returned, "you may believe whatever you wish. I'm telling you the truth. Afterward—take it or leave it. I don't give a——"

"Oh, how can a man be so heartless?"

"No sooner had this young woman arrived in this house than the landlady of it—a dreadful old crone who was there all the time—tried to drug her. The landlady

did succeed in making her a prisoner while the girl, Jessie Schofield, was spirited out of the house. At least, that is what Mrs. Underwood thinks; and I agree with her. Mrs. Underwood is remaining there in the house to keep an outlook for Jessie while I get the police on the job. She certainly has her courage with her! That's why I'm helping her. Any man would."

"Any man would," Julia sneered cuttingly; "when the other woman makes a fool of him—especially if she's young—especially when she claims that she's married!"

"She's not so young!" Pennington droned.

"And I suppose she's ugly!"

"Fairly so!"

"If she's got a husband," Julia exploded, "why isn't he here—since she's on such a noble errand?"

Pennington gave a start. He turned to the woman at his side with a look of positive admiration.

"By gad, Julia," he exclaimed; "for once in your life you're right. Out of all this bad temper, and suspicion, and bickering—there, there, now! Be a nice girl—you've really given me a valuable idea. You're right about the husband. If any woman ever needed her husband, she's the one, back there in that house right now. Trust me! That's all—"

The limousine was drawing up in front of a new apartment house. The neighbourhood was not aristocratic, precisely, but it was suggestive of high rents and other extravagances. The house itself presented an impressive façade. Along the brilliantly lighted curb there was a row of other cars almost, if not quite, as sumptuous as that in which rode Pennington and his friend. A six-foot doorman in a pale blue uniform strode forward to receive them.

Pennington broke off in what he was saying. He bade

Julia a rather abrupt good night—softening the abruptness, however, by a slight pressure of her hand. He borrowed the car which he himself had given her and ordered the chauffeur to drive him around to the nearest telegraph-office.

He was recalling not only what Viola Swan herself had told him—back there in Mrs. Moss's house; still further back, when they were on the train together—but what he himself knew about the place whence she came. That trains out of Rising Sun for any destination were few and far between he was certain. There was no telling when Viola Swan's husband could get a train to New York.

But there was the yellow touring-car.

Thought of it brought a rueful smile to Pennington's lips; it was not a smile, though, wholly devoid of joy. By this car, after a manner of speaking, had he brought the mark to his face. It would be poetic justice with a vengeance to use the car now to complete his rehabilitation. The car was at his country-place not so far from Rising Sun. The chauffeur also was there—yawning his head off for sheer ennui, most likely.

It was to the chauffeur that Pennington sent his telegram:

Take yellow car to Rising Sun and find Rufus Underwood, who lives there. Bring him to New York immediately—as fast as you can.

Pennington read this over with satisfaction. He knew his chauffeur. He knew the roads. He knew the car.

“That means,” he said, “some run!”

Mrs. Moss crept back into her quarters at the rear of the hall. She was well inside the sitting-room and had closed the door behind her before she was aware of a

movement other than her own. She shot her furtive glance in the direction of the bedroom. She saw Viola Swan standing at the door.

Mrs. Moss was startled. It took several seconds before she could become quite sure of her eyes. During this time Viola neither spoke nor moved—except for a slight swaying movement. She was supporting herself, arms out, her hands against the sides of the doorway. It was Mrs. Moss who spoke first.

"I was afraid he'd wake you up," she babbled, "and you was sleeping like a little child. But these young men are so impetuous."

"I don't understand," gasped Viola Swan.

"The young gentleman who was just here to see you," intimated Mrs. Moss.

"I saw no one."

Mrs. Moss absorbed this statement, digested it, disgorged the residue so to speak.

"Well, he was here," she said amiably, as if to put the girl at her ease. "He was a swell, too—a lovely gentleman, don't care at all how he spends his coin! If you do take up the old life, Viola, I must say that you couldn't make a better beginning. Oh, it just warms the cockles of my old heart, Viola, when I see a girl who appreciates some of the sense I have tried to drill into her. How are you feeling, pet?"

"Heavy—heavy and ill," Viola answered, sweeping a hand across her forehead.

She ignored the other things that Mrs. Moss had said. For the moment Mrs. Moss appeared to be willing to let things rest there. She was still far from being perfectly reassured. There was something about all this

which was a confusion to her ordinarily clear if devious manner of thought.

"Let me give you something," Mrs. Moss suggested maternally.

"I wish to send a telegram," said Viola. "Do you suppose I could get a messenger-boy?"

Mrs. Moss had another internal spasm of alarm, but mastered it.

"Jo, the cellar-man, he'll carry your message for you," she volunteered. "Jo's a nut, but he's honest. I wouldn't have him around if he wasn't. You know me."

She hobbled around to her old writing-desk, opened it, rummaged out a sheet of paper and a gold-mounted fountain-pen.

"A friend of mine give me this pen," she explained. "A sweet young girl she was, and loved me just like I was her mother. But," she meditated shrewdly, "I'd a heap sight rather had the money that the pen was worth."

Viola seated herself at the desk. Her thoughts fled to Rufus, and her heart surged toward him like a gust of flame. She wrote:

Am safe in New York—be longer than I expected. I need you. Join me at the old address. You are ever with me. Perfect love driveth out fear.

ALICE.

Viola didn't dare leave the house herself. So much had she told Pennington when he was there. It was just possible that she had been mistaken about Jessie having been spirited away. She would remain at least until the house had been gone over by the detectives whom Pennington had promised to have put on the job through a friend of his at headquarters.

She would remain even longer, most likely; for she was more resolved than ever to confront Alec Breen,

if need be, and wring the truth from him—however much of the truth he might possess.

Her telegram written, she called Jo, the cellar-man.

“Thirty words, including the name,” she smiled, as she handed him the message. “You’ll keep the change for yourself.”

She and Jo were old acquaintances, after a fashion, having seen each other often in the old days. She gave him a dollar-bill, and straightway felt that no money she had ever spent before in her life had ever been devoted to a better cause.

Rufus reassured, comforted, called to her side!

Herself re-established as Rufus’s wife!

The scarlet ghost defied!

But Mrs. Moss was waiting for Jo, when he appeared. Ostensibly she had slipped out on an errand. A bottle of beer and a snack of something to eat; and they’d both feel better—so she said.

“Where’s that telegram she give you?” Mrs. Moss demanded.

Jo was a philosopher. At least he was to the extent of getting through this mundane life with the least possible friction. Essential to this was a complete obedience to Mrs. Moss’s orders, also silence unless speech was absolutely required.

He passed over the sheet of paper Viola Swan had given him.

“Come with me into the delicatessen,” said Mrs. Moss. “I guess Cooney will let me do a little writing there of my own.”

The delicatessen store smelled strongly of pickles and salted fish, of cheese, and sausage. Some of the pleasantest—and most poignant—memories of Mrs. Moss’s life

were associated with such smells. Old dissipations, ephemeral but unforgotten loves—these all returned to her. They recalled now a certain other telegram—one which she herself had sent to a certain youth who had loved her, perhaps, as this Rufus loved Viola. She recalled the very words of the telegram.

Cooney, the proprietor of the place, had greeted her cordially, offered her full hospitality.

She copied the address from the telegram which Mrs. Underwood had written, and which she bade Jo to burn. But the telegram itself was identical with the one she had written upward of forty years ago:

"Roses are red and violets blue,  
They don't mix nor I and you."

Agnes Le Motte had composed the words. Agnes always could spout poetry. That's how she had won that man she had married. But Mrs. Moss had kept the words by her for so long that she considered them almost as a composition of her own.

Mrs. Moss loved sentiment.

"I guess that will settle his hash," she remarked with satisfaction. "It done the trick before. It ought to do it again. These kind of boys are all alike."

She signed the poetic telegram with a "V" and handed it over to the waiting Jo. But, just then, Mrs. Moss, emerging from the realm of sentiment, was touched by a cool breeze of caution.

"You better copy this out on a regular telegram-blank," she said. "You can write good enough for that. Then, see that you keep your mouth shut if you know what's good for you. I'm only doing the girl a kindness."

## Chapter XIII

### ALEC SEES THE LIGHT

**I**F Josiah Pennington found his path of duty somewhat confused, Alexander Breen found his own path a thorny maze.

Self-interest, fear, his business-sense, his cupidity, satisfaction with his life as it had unfolded to him since his arrival in New York, all of these things were elements in his maze, dragging his baffled mind this way and that.

But, worst of all, there was another element still—one that he couldn't understand, one that was more persistent than all the rest.

Only vaguely could Alec recognise this element for what it really was—desire.

He could vaguely recognise it as that same thing which had come so close to getting him into serious trouble back in Rising Sun—that time he had enticed Rufus's wife to go riding with him in the little red car. He was rather less vaguely convinced that danger always accompanied this thing.

Alec called it—love.

Alec was quite certain that he had been in love with the former Viola Swan. He wondered now if he could be in love with Jessie Schofield.

He found it touching, as well as highly flattering, that Jessie had come all the way to New York on his ac-

count. After a manner, it promoted him in his own estimation, made him forthwith a man of the world. Maybe she would commit suicide on his account.

Alec rather wished that she would—if she could do so without actually killing herself or getting him into serious trouble. Even if she did kill herself, he reflected seriously, it wouldn't greatly matter though.

She really had “nothing on him”—nothing that he couldn't explain to any worldly wise magistrate—a fellow New Yorker, one who himself perhaps had unwittingly turned the head of some simple village maid.

Alec was out taking that walk Mrs. Moss had recommended to him. He had intended to while away the two or three hours before it was time for him to go to work by attending a moving-picture show, then taking a stroll through the theatrical section of Broadway—a polishing and higher educational course which Alec gave himself every time the opportunity was presented.

But before he could make up his mind what film he wished to view, the complexities of life were gripping his mind far more than any “first run” had ever done.

Desire dragged him one way; fear another; business yet a third.

It was the last-mentioned influence which really won, so far as appearances were concerned; for Alec, instead of turning north, when he came to Broadway, and thus making his way into what has hitherto been referred to as the centre of the Beauty-Mart, turned south in the direction of Fourteenth Street where his restaurant was situated.

Yet it wasn't the restaurant, either, that attracted Alec in that direction. The restaurant furnished the real home-atmosphere, it is true; and any man likes the home-atmosphere when he's in trouble. But what really drew

Alec to the familiar neighbourhood was the conviction that he could get light from a certain friend down there.

The friend was Doc.

He found Doc in what might be called semi-uniform—a visored cap on his head, a headless bamboo cane in his hand. Otherwise, Doc's outfit was just ordinary clothing, neither clean nor neat. As for the rest, on Doc's face was the usual red nose and his habitual expression of disdain.

He was walking up and down in front of a show-window where there were displayed various dental specimens, some done in plaster and some nature's very own. Now and then Doc barked something in a raucous voice. But most of the time he never lifted his lacrimose eye to see whether any one entered or not. Most of his activity went into his efforts to keep small boys away from the door of the establishment, where they were trying to get a peek at more than the window-display offered.

Doc's periodical switching at these young pests with his bamboo cane was not altogether unlike the efforts of an old horse to keep a swarm of flies away by means of a stubby and inefficient tail.

"Hello, Doc," Alec greeted his old-time customer.

"Hello yourself," Doc came back, showing some slight sign of animation.

"How is tricks?"

"Rotten," Doc answered. "*World's greatest experts—consultation free!* You dam' kids get away from there. How's tricks with you?"

"That's what I want to find out," Alec answered cryptically.

"How's that?"

"Ever have a girl stuck on you?"

Doc crossed his dusty beat to the far side of the show-

window and barked his call to the passing crowds. He came back. "Lots of them," he said, with a gleam in his watery eye. "One of them wanted to marry me once. What's biting you?"

"One's stuck on me," Alec confessed.

"Why don't you fall for her?" Doc inquired. "What's the matter with her?"

"Nothing," Alec responded with conviction. "Only she's run away from home on my account, and I don't know what to do with her."

"Where've you got her?"

"Up to the place where I live. The landlady's on, and she says I might get into trouble. She wants me to give the girl the go-by."

"How old is she?"

"I don't know; but she's old enough to be wise. I didn't learn her nothing."

"Well, are her folks next?"

"They ain't got nothing on me," Alec averred, "even if they are. She come here of her own accord."

Doc took a turn up and down in front of the show-window. It gave him time to think. It was no interruption to his thought as he invited the grown-up stragglers about the door to step in and survey the scientific marvels inside. "*World's greatest experts—consultations free! Step in, gents! Scientific specimens! Don't cost you nothing! Greatest educational zibit world's ever seen!*"

His duty performed, Doc rejoined Alec.

"Good looker?" he inquired.

"She's a pippin," Alec answered, with a touch of pride.

"Why don't you marry her?"

The question slid into Alec like a flash of steel. It made him jump and quiver—mentally, at least. A cou-

ple of seconds went by before he could recover his equipoise.

"Who? Me? You mean me marry her?"

"Why not?" Doc whispered huskily.

"Well, I don't know," said Alec, baffled; "except that I never done such a thing nor thought about it."

"You dam' kids get away from here," said Doc, with no great rancor, swinging his bamboo stick. "*Step right in, gents! To-day's las' day. Yurupin dentists! Scientific zibit!*"

He returned to Alec's side—spoke to Alec from an angle of forty-five degrees while he kept a lachrymose eye on the show-front.

"A wife's a good thing," Doc confided.

"How do you know?" Alec inquired smartly. "I thought you was never married!"

"That's how I know," Doc replied dispassionately, with a touch of disdain. "I've went the limit on not being married, and I know that there ain't anything in it. I was a swell young buck once myself, like you are now. You know—wise guy—pulling down my eighteen per—"

"What doing, Doc?"

"Selling policy."

"I see! Insurance agent!"

Doc flashed a look at Alec as if not very pleased—as if he suspected Alec of poking fun at him. Alec's innocence of expression reassured him. He resumed the husky thread of his discourse.

"And what have I got to show for it now?" he wanted to know, with a curiosity which was merely mild. "I ain't got no place to go but a gin-mill, a restaurant like yours, and then a scratch-house to sleep in with a lot of bums. *Come on now, you kids—*"

"Aw, you don't own the sidewalk!"

Doc made an ineffective swish with his stick. Neither the retort nor his inability to land on the enemy seemed to make any difference.

"I don't see where I come in on that," said Alec.

"Neither did I when I was your age," Doc countered, with bitter patience. "I was one of these wise guys myself, then—like all of these guys you see going into the muzee. There ain't no such thing as something free in this world—leastwise, not in New York; especially here on Fourteent' Street; more especially yet where the ladies are concerned. *Free to-day, gents! Walk right in! World's greatest tooth experts!* And take that from me."

"Suppose I did marry her," Alec suggested, with an odd catching of his breath.

"Suppose you did," said Doc, with a touch of mellow-ness such as he had not hitherto shown. "Suppose you did! Suppose you did tuck her away in a nice little flat—where she could get nice and fat—and wear a blue apron when she fried your beefsteak for you—and where you could take off your coat when you et it—"

"That listens good," Alec confessed.

"That's what I'm telling you," Doc pursued, with a ray of fervour. "You know—some nice plush chairs with tides on the back—and a crayon portrait of yourself on the wall. I guess you don't know what it is to set in a place like that in your stocking-feet and listen to the little woman rattling the dishes."

"How do you know about it?" Alec was charmed.

Doc didn't answer. There followed another brief interval of professional detachment on his part as he repeated the invitation of the large-hearted experts who ran the exhibition; an interval during which Alec watched the drift and counterdrift of the crowds along the broad sidewalk—all races, all religions, all colours almost, but

all more or less reduced to the same drabness of semi-poverty, semiignorance, semiacceptance of the disillusionments and tragedies of this half-evolved "promised land."

But Alec looked on this with unseeing eyes. He was blinded mentally, at least, by that ray of light Doc had caused to penetrate his darkness. Nor was Doc through. Doc was still in the grip of his own eloquence as he came back again.

"The little flat, the fat little pigeon! It don't cost much, Alec; and the wise guy ain't no wise guy at all when he refuses to put up the price for it. He laps up the free stuff for a while; free lunch is his'n later on; free home on the Island; free bed in Bellevue; free coffin in the morgue! But that ain't all. What's he done for his country? Where's his kids? Are they workin' for him? Are they fightin' for Old Glory? Are they braggin' about who their papa was, and bringin' him presents at Christmas? Are they goin' to church and sort of squarin' their old man for things he done which he hadn't ought to done?"

"You've got a good line of dope, all right," Alec confessed. He was deeply moved. His eyes were bright. There was a slight tremor of his lower lip.

"And, anyways," said Doc; "you can always blow, if the first one don't turn out right. You can always try it again, and no harm done. *World's greatest—Step in, gents! 's free—*"

"I guess I'll duck," said Alec. "Ta-ta!"

The truth of the matter was that Alec, for the first time in his life, actually felt the need of being alone.

## Chapter XIV

### CRULLERS AND LOVE

THE restaurant where Alec now worked was a great improvement over the lunch-wagon where he had made his metropolitan début. Even an amateur would have admitted that. To Alec it was nothing less than the second rung in the ladder which inevitably would lead him right on up to the throne of "Alexander Breen, the Sandwich King."

The restaurant was of a kind familiarly known in certain circles as a "buckwheat front"; that is, there was a cook, dressed in a uniform more or less white, who flapped griddle-cakes on a hot iron table just inside the plate-glass show-window of the establishment, thus luring the idle and making their mouths water, whether they were hungry or not.

There was another cook, and also a dishwasher, back of the partition to the rear of the restaurant. An omnibus-boy was kept busy much of the time clearing away the dishes from the broad-armed chairs where the detached gentlemen among the restaurant's customers generally fed, also from the dozen tables or so "reserved for ladies."

Of this restaurant Alec was the night-manager—a position which was no sinecure.

But Alec loved it.

He loved it when the night was still young, when the restaurant was crowded and the full staff was on hand.

He was an ideal manager. He could amuse the customers, keep the other employés in good humour and on the jump, and then still do more work than any one else present in the way of slicing bread and ham, roast beef and cheese, sliding out pieces of pie and saucers of stewed fruit.

It was when Alec was all alone, though, that he loved his profession and establishment most of all. He often let those who were under him leave considerably before their allotted time merely for the more complete indulgence of this professional passion of his. But that wasn't why he let them go early on this particular night.

It was to think—and to contemplate his dreams—that he wanted to be alone to-night.

Outwardly, there was nothing about him to indicate that he had changed in any way. He had the same old skill, the same old contented smile as he showed off, the same old patter as he served the customers known or unknown.

"Gotcha! Sinkers—keeps down the high price of living!"

"We sell eggs for less 'n a hen can make 'em!"

"Chicken? Right out of the chorus!"

Alec slipped over these and kindred remarks with the same glib speed with which he served his customers, took their money, gave them the proper change. He made no mistakes.

Yet, for the first time in his business career, a part of his mind was not on his work. When there were no customers, or when such customers as were present were occupied with such provender as he had served to them, he leaned back against the rear counter, where the dessert was kept, and let himself go in musings as vague,

and yet as fragrant, as the steam which steadily wafted out from the big coffee-urn.

These musings were partly inspired by that sketch of domestic felicity which Doc had etched on the virgin plate of his brain; partly inspired by what Mrs. Moss had said to him; partly by the memory of his adventure with Viola Swan; but most of all, perhaps, by that queer and baffling element of desire which had come back to plague him.

Midnight drifted by on the current of the night.

As on the successive barges of a river-pageant the processional elements of Alec's life followed on—the ladies from a neighbouring burlesque show and their fellows, as gay as the girls and boys going home from a country-dance; an all-male cast, after that, from the closing saloons—eaters of fried ham and drinkers of coffee; next, more actors, man and woman, from belated rehearsals and vaudeville try-outs; an accompanying, diverse flotilla of policemen off duty, of women who came in singly or in pairs and singly or in pairs went away; night-hawk chauffeurs, gamblers, touts, loafers, thieves.

Doc came in later than Alec had ever seen him before. And, at his first glance, Alec could see that Doc was in his cups. Doc's eye was more lachrymose than ever, his look of disdain more settled.

"Hello, Doc," said Alec, stepping forward and wiping off the arm of the chair in which Doc had seated himself. "How's tricks?"

Doc probably answered that tricks were rotten, but Alec never heard him. Alec had casually glanced in the direction of the front door at the arrival of what he had supposed to be another customer.

But it was a vision which greeted Alec's eyes—the vision of a girl more powdered and rouged than any

one of all those nocturnal customers who had already drifted past his eyes. The vision, moreover, gave an instant impression of being richly garbed—silks, feathers. The vision had curly hair.

Across a final, glittering avenue and into a street which was almost violently dark and deserted—so sharp the contrast was—glided the taxi which had brought Mrs. Spencer and Jessie Schofield from the other side of town.

Finally the vehicle rolled up in front of an unlighted, brownstone residence. Similar buildings flanked this residence left and right, although some of these contained shops in their basements. But even the shops were dark. The street was so different from the one in which Mrs. Moss resided that Jessie could not refrain from commenting on the fact.

“You’re in a swell neighbourhood now,” Mrs. Spencer whispered; “and you don’t want to forget that. You want to do exactly what I tell you to. You don’t want everybody to think that you’re a little rube, do you, chick?”

Jessie said that she didn’t. In spite of her devouring curiosity, and despite all her accumulated longings for adventure, Jessie felt just a little uneasy. The uneasiness was accentuated, rather than diminished, by Mrs. Spencer’s attitude. Some subtle change had come over Mrs. Spencer—precisely what, it would be hard to say. But Jessie was only slightly intuitional.

It seemed rather strange to Jessie that Mrs. Spencer should enter the basement door of her residence instead of mounting the high stoop. A coloured man let them in—a man who was squat and powerful, swart and glittering-eyed. He wore a dress-suit. His attitude toward

Mrs. Spencer was certainly one of profound respect. At herself, though, it seemed to Jessie that the negro looked with less favour—with a certain sullenness, even.

“Some beloved old retainer, no doubt,” said Jessie to herself; “eccentric, yet faithful.”

She listened to Mrs. Spencer and the servant.

“Any one here?” the lady asked.

“A couple of dead ones, mam. Young Mr. Freckles showed up again asking for Miss Pearl.”

“Why didn’t you tell him that she’d left?”

“Did tell him—told him she’d went with another gentleman and never come back. Mr. Freckles, he acted up some—said he was going to suicide.”

“Tell Pearl I want to see her,” Mrs. Spencer ordered. She turned to Jessie. “Come on, chick!”

They passed up a boxed-in stairway to the floor above. It was there that Jessie’s physical senses were assailed by a perfect gale of adventure and romance—an atmosphere of tobacco-smoke and burned perfume infused with a dull red light; then, from the partly opened door of a more brilliantly lighted room at the front of the house a drawled and mumbled curse in a masculine voice, a soft titter of feminine laughter.

Mrs. Spencer paused to listen.

So did Jessie, naturally. There for a while Jessie was half expecting to see Mrs. Spencer stride forward and reprove whoever it was in the parlour. But Mrs. Spencer did no such thing. Instead, she was at particular pains to keep her presence a secret as she led Jessie up yet another flight.

“She’s much more tactful than my grandmother ever was,” said Jessie to herself.

They entered a rear room on the second floor. The room was large and sumptuously furnished. A more

critical spirit than that possessed apparently by either Jessie or Mrs. Spencer would have pronounced the room too sumptuously furnished, perhaps—too many curtains of a too heavy stuff, too many mirrors, too much furniture of every kind. But there was no questioning the general impression the apartment gave of riotous, if rococo, luxury.

Out of a small, lace-quilted basket in a corner of the room a fluffy white dog suddenly popped, then paused to stretch and yawn before proceeding further in its welcome. Mrs. Spencer seized the little animal and kissed it rapturously. She was still engaged in this demonstration of affection when there was a light knock at the door.

"Come on in, Pearl," Mrs. Spencer invited, divining who it was.

Jessie, still holding her suit-case, somewhat abashed, still with that feeling of uneasiness fingering her heart, felt a spasm of relief at the sight of the newcomer.

She saw a girl of about her own age, one who exuded an aroma of lazy amiability at the very first glance. She was a dazzling blonde, plump, loosely yet richly dressed in a satin kimono. She had paused just inside the door and had given Jessie a smile.

The effect of this smile lingered all the time that Mrs. Spencer was whispering to Pearl. Manifestly, in Mrs. Spencer's set there was no impropriety in such whispering.

"And now," said Mrs. Spencer finally, "I'm going to leave you two little birdies alone. Pearl, this is Jessie I've been telling you about. Chick," she said, to Jessie this time, "Pearl's going to doll you up a little. You don't want folks to think you're a rube, do you? We're going to have some swell gents here for the big eats an

hour from now. Pearl will wise you up; won't you, Pearl?"

Pearl's answer to this was a smile, languid but bright, as she extended a plump arm around Jessie's waist.

Alec Breen stood there in the midst of his restaurant staring at the vision which had appeared at the door.

His mind was assailed by a conflict of doubts and memories, a discordant horde of impressions and speculations. He felt as if he'd like to run. He knew that he would have to stand his ground. Perhaps it was all an illusion.

Yet, surely, his eyes could not be deceiving him. The vision resolved itself into Jessie Schofield's self.

What doubt may have lingered in Alec's mind was rapidly swept away by Jessie herself. For Jessie, at the sight of Alec, evidently forgot that she was the great lady. She sang out, "Oh, Alec!" and came running toward him.

There were a number of persons already in the restaurant at the time, apart from Doc and Alec himself—two girls, themselves striking enough but inclined to be shabby, and the ordinary run of men.

"Hello!" Alec exclaimed, momentarily stifled.

Something in his tone recalled to Jessie that this was New York, and that this was a public place. She became the great lady instantly. She tossed up her head, gave a half-glance about her, and came up to where Doc sat and Alec stood.

"Come on back to one of these tables reserved for ladies," Alec invited softly and hastily. "I want to talk to you."

Jessie moved off in the direction Alec indicated.

"Marry her," mumbled Doc.

Doc hadn't looked up. He didn't look up even now. He seemed to be immersed in bitterness.

"Marry her," Doc mumbled again. "One of 'em wanted to marry me, once. She had a good job, too. I'd a-never had to turn my hand over again. Look at me now."

"Sinkers with your coffee, Doc?"

Alec didn't wait for the answer. He stepped nimbly over to the coffee-urn, drew a mug of the fragrant, light brown liquid, shoved a spoon and two pieces of sugar into it, scraped a brace of crullers onto a plate and was back at Doc's side, all in the time that it would have taken Doc to decide whether his answer should be yes or no.

"What kind of pie you got?"

The customer who asked this was a gentleman who wore among other things a derby hat and a grey flannel shirt. Alec knew him well and could answer him on a plane of friendship.

"Prune, apple, peach, lemon, mince, punk-punkin—chew it after every meal!"

"Aw, make it prune," the customer ordered as if disgusted with the world.

One would have thought that Alec knew beforehand what the order was going to be. He seemed to be on his way back with the wedge of prune-pie on a plate before the last words were out of his customer's mouth.

But Alec hadn't exhausted his display of skill. He pretended to stumble, let the plate fall. While his gallery still gasped, Alec not only recovered himself, but the plate and the pie, stepping up as blithely to his customer as if nothing had happened.

"Say, bo, you'd be a riot in vaudeville," the customer commended him.

But Alec was too good an actor to attempt to force

his triumph. He felt, anyway, that he had given some idea of his cleverness by this time to the girl who sat back there watching him.

"I think you're wonderful," said Jessie, momentarily forgetful of herself.

"You ought to see me some times," Alec recommended with no false modesty. "Where have you been to? Where did you get those clothes? How did you happen to come down here at this time of the night?"

It was as if all those inarticulate musings and vague plannings of the afternoon and night had suddenly been given voice.

"I've been thinking about you," he hurried on. "Half the time I didn't know whether I was cutting beef or ham. I wanted to see you and talk to you, and here you come blowing in at three o'clock in the morning like you knew I was sitting up for you."

There was something definitely flattering in Alec's hasty speech, also in the way that he looked at her—as much so as if he had commented openly on the appearance she made.

"I skipped out especially to show you," Jessie confessed. "I suppose they'll kick up a racket when I get back."

"Where's that? Mrs. Moss's?"

"Naw!"

Jessie turned up her nose.

"Then where?" Alec demanded, consumed by a mounting curiosity.

"Mrs. Spencer's!"

"Mrs. Spencer's? I never heard of her. Where'd you get a hold of her?"

"She's a friend of mine."

"You got acquainted with her over at Mrs. Moss's,"

Alec intimated accusingly. He would have liked to make his accusation somewhat harsher—in Alec's heart there was something strangely like pain; jealousy, perhaps—but he didn't dare. "Mrs. Spencer's one of those ladies that live over at Mrs. Moss's. I've seen them."

"She is not!"

"Then, who is she?"

"She's a rich lady, if you want to know. It was Mrs. Moss who introduced us, but Mrs. Spencer's quite superior to Mrs. Moss."

"In what way?"

"In the first place, she wears much finer clothes and she's much more cultured. Also, she lives in one of the most beautiful houses I've ever seen—all looking-glasses and red wall-paper and gilded woodwork."

"Are those her clothes you got on?"

"Another young lady who is visiting her lent me these."

"You seem to have gone pretty strong on the powder and paint, Jessie. Did Mrs. Spencer put you up to that? Was it her who curled your hair?"

"Yes!"

All of a sudden it seemed as if that preliminary pang of uncatalogued pain in Alec's heart was spreading—spreading like a fever; and as if, like a fever, it was contagious—spreading to Jessie Schofield sitting there at his side.

"How did it come that you come down here?" he asked again, with an inexplicable tremor mounting to his throat.

Jessie smiled. She tucked in her chin slightly, looked at him from the tops of her eyes. She started to make some remark designed to be worldly, if not precisely flippant.

"Oh, I was just—just—"

Her voice broke. At the same instant her eyes were swimming with tears.

"I was lonely," she blurted. "The place was full of strangers—strange gentlemen. They frightened me. They made me ashamed—and I wanted to see—somebody—from home!"

The tears streaked down into the powder and rouge. She made another desperate effort to smile.

She began to sniffle instead.

## Chapter XV

### BLACK OR WHITE?

FOR the first time since going into the restaurant business, Alec was at a loss what to do. For the first time he so far forgot himself as to sit down at a customer's side. Jessie wasn't a customer, precisely, in the narrower meaning of the term; but technically she was.

He had started to falter out some question as to what she would have, and ended up by seating himself in the chair at her side.

And sit there for a while he did, lost in a miserable silence.

Jessie continued to weep.

Then Alec, with the air of one who fears to disturb a sleeping child, cautiously pushed back his chair and got up.

There is some instinct which all human animals possess to seek shelter in the familiar occupation at the moment of stress, the habitual activity grown dear and comfortable through use. It was that way with Alec now.

He stepped over to the counter, drew a mug of coffee, sugared it, slipped a pair of crullers onto a plate, and brought these things back to the table where Jessie sat.

He put these things before her and quietly withdrew.

No Chesterfield could have paid her an attention more delicate, more finely inspired.

Several of the customers who had been there had now withdrawn. Only Doc and the young gentleman in the grey flannel shirt remained.

Doc was meditative, head down, muttering to himself, the lines of his face drawn into a map of Ultimate Disdain. The young gentleman of the grey shirt had retrieved the soiled copy of an evening paper left by some other customer and was absorbing the contents of the sporting page.

Alec, for the time being, paid no attention to either of them. He went about the work of gathering up such empty dishes as happened to be scattered about, and was thankful that there was no immediate occasion for speech.

He was aware of a queer illusion—the same sort of an illusion as had confronted him a little while ago when Jessie Schofield had first appeared at the door. Then, it had been Jessie, yet not Jessie; the physical semblance of the girl whom he had known in Rising Sun, yet this physical semblance made over as by the touch of a magician. It was a change which allured him, yet struck him with distress. This explains, to a degree, what was in his mind now.

That was Jessie Schofield back there, and yet it wasn't Jessie. He wondered what had happened to her, and half formulated his inquiry into the deduction that the magician touch had been secured only at a price—a price paid by Jessie herself, the price of her previous personality.

The Jessie Schofield of Rising Sun he had been willing to marry. But this one? He sought to disguise his secret misgivings by a show of professional activity.

He slapped Doc on the back.

"How's the old hoss?" Alec demanded with simulated joviality.

"Rotten!" Doc mumbled.

"Fry it on both sides and use lots of ketchup," Alec recommended. "That's what I do when I get a Chinee egg. Couldn't tell it from new."

"The world's full of eggs like that," Doc commented. "You're right. World don't know no difference. Not here in New York, leastwise, it don't."

Alec gathered up Doc's mug and plate. He stood there hesitant, trying to extract light on his own situation from Doc's wisdom. Such light as he did extract brought him but small comfort. All his own smartness and wit were being pushed out of him. All that would come into his brain were scraps of observation unconsciously collected since his own advent in New York.

He cast a look back at Jessie. Sight of her brought with it a wave of tenderness and desire, but there was no mistaking it: on the crest of the wave was a froth of caution, of hopelessness, of dismay.

Was Jessie good? Or was she bad? Was she destined to become such a little fat domesticated pigeon as Doc had described? Or was she to become like certain other girls who patronised this restaurant? He didn't know.

"Don't hurry away, Doc," he urged; "I may want to talk to you about something."

Alec, with Doc's empty dishes in his hand, skated across the floor to gather the dishes of the eater of prune-pie. That worthy was folding his newspaper with the satisfied air of an intellectual who has just finished the reading of a good book.

"Rough House Smitty win his second bout wit' Kid Johnson," he announced. "I knowed him when—"

"Stick around," Alec interrupted. "Something may be going to break. How about another shot of pie"—his

voice lurched, for he was doing an unprecedented thing—“on me?”

“Go as far as you like,” his guest accepted.

With a flourish, Alec drew two fresh mugs of coffee. Deftly, with the skill of a professional juggler, he secured two plates, one of which received more crullers for Doc, the other the sportsman’s pie. He made a step or two as if forgetful of his direction, pirouetted, and delivered the victuals with a flourish of triumph.

The sportsman laughed out loud. Even old Doc grinned. But it wasn’t for them that Alec had displayed his virtuosity. Besides, he may have suspected that their approbation was stimulated by the free food he dispensed.

It was to Jessie he looked. He was rewarded by seeing her smile, impulsive, friendly.

But Jessie had wept. The rouge and the powder which had adorned her young face were badly streaked. And, regardless of that smile of hers at seeing him perform, her mood was sombre.

Alec elected a cup of buttermilk for himself, cut himself a generous sandwich, and seated himself once more at Jessie’s side.

“Eat your crullers, sweetie,” he pleaded.

“I’m not hungry,” Jessie complained.

“You’ve started on them, so you might as well finish them,” Alec counselled gently, alluding to the tiny nick Jessie had already made in one of them.

The reasoning appeared to influence Jessie favourably. Still with that sad and reflective look on her face she picked up a cruller and bit into it. She tried to chew it meditatively, but the bite disappeared with surprising rapidity. She took another. The entire cruller took the plunge between her generous lips.

"City-crullers are much—better—than country-crullers," she admitted sadly, after an interval.

Alec was in process of doing full credit to his own nourishment. He washed down the large bite of sandwich he had just taken. He was in too great a hurry to waste time on proper mastication. He had something to say.

"You could always have all the crullers you wanted," he jolted, half aloud, impetuously. "I know where I can buy 'em at fifty cents a hundred."

"They're awfully good," Jessie rewarded him, distraught, as she picked up the second cruller and bit into it.

If the first cruller went fast, the second one disappeared as if by magic. Jessie was licking her fingers while Alec was still smearing mustard on the second half of his sandwich. Without a word Alec got up, took her plate and brought back another brace of the confection Doc also so greatly loved.

"Who are those two gentlemen?" Jessie asked.

Her mood was softening, her sadness—whatever the inspiration of it—disappearing under the influence of the food.

"Customers of mine," said Alec; "customers and friends. The old gentleman is a doctor. Anyways, I call him Doc. That shows you how well acquainted we are. Fine man, too, highly educated, practically at the head of a scientific institute down the street. You know—one of these sort of old professors? Don't care nothing about money; dotty, but nice.

"The young guy's a friend of mine, too. He just about put Rough House Smitty where he is to-day—probably one of the best-known prize-fighters in the world right now. You ought to hear Smitty call little old Alec by

his first name. He threatened to smash me in the bean the last time he was in here—you know, only fooling. He was soused at the time."

"I should think that you'd just love it here," Jessie quavered. "What are those under the glass cover, chocolate éclairs?"

"Sure—try one?"

"I'm not a bit hungry," Jessie answered, detached, yet pleased.

Alec brought her one.

Alec himself was softened by the food he had taken. He watched Jessie with a recurrence of all the tenderness and desire he had previously experienced as she swallowed her first lump of éclair.

"Feeling better, tootsie?" he whispered.

He was visibly moved, and was dying to know what had happened while she was a guest of the woman who had taken her away from Mrs. Moss's establishment. But, none the less, he preferred this killing suspense to what Jessie might tell him.

Jessie was trying to eat her éclair with dignity. The pastry was so outrageously good, though, that there was something of a struggle between her dignity and her greed. Her mouth was full. She gave Alec a sidelong glance from her still-painted through rather streaked eyes.

Jessie looked exceedingly good to Alec. Into his mind there flashed a small vision of what Rufus Underwood had done.

But Rufus was a farmer.

No city man would act as Rufus had acted.

There returned to him the feeling of sin and superiority which had actuated him during so much of his sojourn at Rising Sun.

## Chapter XVI

BY ROYAL COMMAND

**S**UCH a night! Such a dawn! And every day is the Day of Days for some one, some pair whom God hath joined together, some scattered group meshed in the common net of Karma.

While Alec Breen and Jessie Schofield thus faltered, blindly, so with another pair: Viola Swan, who shudders and prophesies in Mrs. Moss's flat, waiting for the dawn as a man condemned might wait either for death or reprieve; Rufus Underwood, her husband, who also groans and keeps his vigil.

Rufus sat there in the room that had been theirs. There was no light except the dusky opalescence of the night—the night of the open country, starlit, misty, with shadows as black and deep as death, and pale drifts as elusive and subtle as hopes of heaven. There was no sound except that eternal murmur of the Unadilla, the skirl of crickets and frogs, the occasional sough and rustle of the wakeful trees.

The windows were open. The breeze came in. The odours of the night reminded him of her.

“Alice! Alice! Viola! Viola!”

Rufus caught himself as a man will after an emotional outbreak when he is alone. He listened to the echo of his own voice and wondered what it signified. He remembered that other time he had called to her—in a delirium like this. Then she had answered him. It

seemed incredible to him that she should never answer him again.

"It can't be," he said.

He looked at the bed where she had slept at his side, and, sitting down on the edge of it, touched the vacancy where she had lain. He did this with a degree of reverence and awe.

What had become of this creature who had occupied this place—this tenderness and warmth he had felt at his side—this mystery and charm which had come into his life, to ennable him, to make him weak as a child and strong as a god?

He let his head fall into his hands.

Finally, once more he struck a match and lit the lamp. The lamp stood on a table near the bed, and he was surprised to see how many burned matches already lay around it. There had been none a while before. But at first sight he didn't see the cause of his torment. The breeze had carried it to the floor—a slip of paper.

"Thus, O God," said Rufus to himself, "could a breath from you make this thing as if it had never existed!"

The thought somehow consoled him as he stooped and picked it up—that telegram Mrs. Moss had caused to be sent to him. He read it through. He read each word again. Most of all, his eyes remained on the signature.

The tragic simplicity of it! The tragic folly!

Two lines of doggerel signed with a "V"—brought to him on the wings of the night to scoff at those fine sentiments of his; as the only answer to the prayers, spoken and unspoken, which clamoured from his heart.

"You didn't write it," said Rufus. "You didn't write it. You never did a cruel act in your life. You loved all things, made all things love you."

But as Rufus looked up, visualising there in the lamp-light the woman to whom he spoke, there occurred one of those old tricks of consciousness to which humanity must have been accustomed throughout the ages. Whence otherwise could have sprung all those old stories of ghosts and jinn, of devils and angels, witches and errant souls?

Rufus had visualised the Alice Linn he had married—slender, brave, loving, faithful, with a spirit as beautiful as her physical presence. He saw her as a semblance in pale blue. Back of this there evolved another shape—scarlet this time. It was fleeting, momentary. It was gone, but he had recognised it—the wraith of Viola Swan!

Rufus turned down the wick with a shaking hand. He blew out the light and slid down to his knees.

Now, whatever Rufus's petition, behold the answer on the way!

Pennington's chauffeur was a man called Beck. There may have been a more elaborate name on Beck's license-card as a registered chauffeur. There must have been. There were certain other names of his on the books of certain great institutions of State—institutions with steel doors and steel-barred windows. For Beck had been celebrated in his day, despite his youth, in ways just as well forgotten.

He looked the part—not very tall, but exceedingly muscular; a square, seamed face, clean-shaven, which might have been brutal but for its touch of humour, of enlightenment, of knowledge acquired at the price of great suffering.

For all that, a queer presence for that of a messenger of the Lord!

It was getting late.

The same night which had deftly submerged the hills and valleys of the Old Tenderloin, and those of the Unadilla, had similarly immersed Josiah Pennington's country-place.

Beck was sitting in the kitchen talking to the cook. She was much older than Beck—stout, getting grey. No one, looking at them and listening to them for as much as two minutes, would have had any doubt about the depth of affection which existed between them. Beck called her "Honey," and she called him "Willie"—both names ludicrously inappropriate save in the light of love.

There was only once that Beck called her by another name.

The telephone rang. The telephone was in the butler's pantry, just off the kitchen, the swinging door of which had been propped open by a chair. The cook answered. She turned to Beck.

"Willie, it's for you. They're telephoning up from the depot that they got a telegram for you from Mr. Pennington."

Beck hustled over and took the receiver.

"They say," he explained, after a colloquy, "that Mr. Pennington wants me to take the car and bring some one to New York."

"To-morrow morning!"

"To-night!"

He spoke again into the instrument:

"Listen! I got to see that myself. The junction? Seven miles—say, I'll be down there in seven minutes!"

"Willie, you'll be killing yourself!"

"Forget it, hon! Mr. Pennington ain't asking me to do anything like that. I'd go the limit, though, if he did."

He threw his arms about the cook, kissed her twice,

while she surrendered to his tenderness as if she had been a schoolgirl.

"Good-bye, you rascal!" she murmured. "And don't get hurt!"

"Good-bye, mother!" he said very softly.

In truth it was just seven minutes later that the big yellow touring-car snorted up to the little railroad-junction, which was the nearest telegraph-office to Pennington's place. Beck read the message through several times, the night-operator helping him to supply the missing punctuation and make the meaning clear. The message instructed him to proceed to Rising Sun without delay, there to find one Rufus Underwood and bring him to New York—"as fast as you can."

"What if this Underwood ain't expecting you?" the operator suggested.

"That won't make a lot of difference," said Beck, folding up the yellow flimsy. "I'll take this along."

"That won't help," the operator laughed, "if he don't want to go along."

Beck gave the telegrapher a glance of simple conviction.

"Say," he declared; "this is all the same as a warrant. It's got Mr. Pennington's signature on it, ain't it? Well, that name's all the same as if it was the governor's, so far as I'm concerned. I'm off! Good-bye, and thanks!"

"Good-bye! Good luck!"

The last word the telegrapher spoke was still reverberating in his brain when there were a dozen sputtering explosions, a cyclopean snort, a crescendo whine.

"That fellow ought to be an engineer," the operator muttered with a touch of awe as he glanced at his clock. "Rising Sun, twenty miles by the dirt-road! I bet at that he could beat the Cannon-Ball Express!"

The road was deserted,

Beck had that in his favour. It was a fact ever present in his mind as he lifted the thing that carried him on the wings of the wind over hill after hill. It was like a phantom that ran to a music of thunder through a world at an end. The night was like the night after Judgment Day.

In this world there was only one living thing. The thing was a man. The man's name was Rufus Underwood.

He had to be found.

Quick!

Over the hills and through long valleys into which the yellow car gleamed and dissolved like a falling star; the rumble and shriek of a startled bridge; the swift rush through a zone of damp chill where the road followed a river; then up and up, as a rocket climbs, to the crest where another long fall began; scarcely less swift through a dark town where only the houses looked on with amazement—their windows like open mouths and wonderstricken eyes; four more villages; another town! This time, the car slowed up.

Beck found the railroad-station.

Bainbridge!

He jumped from his car, ran over to a lighted window. There was another sleepless telegrapher there. He was a mere youth, interested at once.

"I don't know of no Rufus Underwood," he said; "but there is an Underwood farm out near the river this side of Rising Sun. You can get there quicker if you take the fork to the right where it crosses the right of way. Look out when you come there, too. Twenty-nine's due in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks! So long!"

Beck was gone,

As the car leaped after the glimmer of its own search-lights like a greyhound after a spectral stag the night was penetrated by the long, weird call of a locomotive-whistle.

Number Twenty-nine!

A fast freight!

Beck could see it from a swiftly melting rise of ground. He gave one thought to Pennington's cook. He gave one thought to Pennington himself.

The yellow car flung into the fork to the right as the fast freight rushed in to accept the challenge.

“Missed me by a mile!” panted Beck as the freight bellowed just back of him. It was bellowing still as the night unfolded enough to disclose the dim conformation of a darkling farm under a hill.

A glance, and from this house, like a signal, there came a gleam of yellow light.

Some one was astir in an upper chamber.

There was a lane. A dog barked. A gate flashed into existence. The yellow car crunched to a standstill.

“I'm not going,” said Rufus.

But there was no great decision in his voice. There never can be human decision in the presence of super-human mystery; and with that this night had been filled until now it overflowed.

“You're coming,” Beck said with assurance.

Beck was calm. He understood men—as one who has been among men when their souls were naked. He was friendly, but his assurance was monumental and adamant. He put out a gauntleted hand until it touched the head of unconvinced and growling Duke. His eyes, though, remained on the face of the man he had come to find.

"You're coming," he repeated almost soothingly.  
"Those are my orders from Mr. Pennington."

"Who's Mr. Pennington?" Rufus asked.

"A regular fellow," Beck answered; "one that don't make no false passes, I know. I'd tell you about it only I ain't got the time. Get on your coat and your shoes. I'll give you the run of your life. We'll leave a trail of rube sheriffs right on all the way from here to New York. When we get there we'll learn the traffic-cops a trick or two. Hurry up!"

"Suppose I refuse!"

"You can't!" flared Beck. His jaw came out. He buckled his right arm. "There is a jolt in this!" he softly declared.

Rufus met Beck's eyes. Into his baffled brain there plunged a rioting throng of what his thoughts, questions, gropings, and petitions had been while he was still alone. A ghostly phalanx! Out of the surge there came a flash, or a note, or revelation.

It thrilled him like the blare of a trumpet—Gabriel's!

When Gabriel blows his trumpet in the bright light!

"Wait!" thrilled Rufus. "I believe you were sent. I'll go!"

## Chapter XVII

### THE COSMIC CENTRE

JUST as every day becomes the Day of Days for some person or group of persons, so a mean house in a mean street may become for some human atom, or association of human atoms, the dead centre of the universe—the pivotal point of Cosmos.

See how the threads of a number of destinies were suddenly stretched, taut and straight, to Mrs. Moss's place!

No one would have thought it to see the elderly house standing there in the midst of its somewhat squalid neighbours, there in the thick of that part of New York known as the Old Tenderloin.

The street itself was more sordid than ever in the dawn—which is the way with all human things which are old and evil. Then the contrast is more hideous—the unloveliness of grime and stench, of degradation and secrecy, matched against the supernal purity of the upper air, the refreshed beauty and sweetness of the sky.

And Mrs. Moss's house, despite that certain primness about it, was of the essence of the street. The stained glass of the front door which glowed more or less warmly in the night was now merely the red rim of an eye gone blind. The house itself was silent and sullen. Such human interest as it might possess was hidden in its heart—the nest of warm and ugly secrets, like the heart of

many another creature with a reputation for respectability to maintain.

Yet Mrs. Moss's house was the magnet. Toward it, as straight, as unconscious of other attraction as the black sands of another magnetic field, there sped and aspired the mortal sands of this one.

There was Josiah Pennington's friend—the lady named Julia. The invisible hooks were in every feminine fibre of her—each hook at the end of an invisible thread as strong as silk—each thread drawing her as surely to Mrs. Moss's house as if she had been in the clutch of gravity with nothing but ether to intervene.

She was jealous, miserable, and frantic for relief.

There was something about the happenings of this night which had kept her awake and apprehensive, something which she had been unable to fathom. Men are as inexplicable to women, at times, as women are to men; and the very rarity of this phenomenon makes the sufferings of the woman all the keener.

Julia had always thought she understood Pennington—more or less of a boy, impulsive as to evil, constant as to good.

What had occurred to change him so?

Why had he left her so abruptly? Why had he gone so eagerly at the summons of that other woman? He had told her that this other woman was not so very young, not so very beautiful; but her intuition told her that in this Pennington had deceived her—for his own peace and hers. But she knew no peace.

There was another woman!

"I'll go there again," she whispered. "I'll go there as soon as I dare in the morning. I have a right."

"I'll go there again," was also the message with which another woman was staying her impatience as the night wore on. "I'll go there myself, and if that brat's there I'll slap her face until she'll wish she was dead."

Mrs. Lilly Spencer this time—the nice, rich lady who had taken Jessie Schofield from Mrs. Moss's house and from whose own house Jessie had fled.

Mrs. Spencer had passed a sleepless night, which was no extraordinary thing for her, perhaps; but the night had been one of bitterness and trouble as well.

In the first place, there was Jessie's inexplicable truancy. In the second place, there was the impolite intrusion of the police. It wasn't a raid, precisely; just the inquisitive visit of a number of cynical young men from headquarters with orders straight from their supreme chief to find a certain girl from the village of Rising Sun.

Mrs. Spencer, quite professionally, had denied all knowledge of the existence of such a person. The young men had impolitely insisted on a search of the premises. Mrs. Spencer herself was considerably more surprised than the detectives themselves when Jessie failed to materialise.

The disappearance was there to rankle even when the detectives were gone. Right on into the dawn it rankled. There was only one place where she could hope to find relief, and that was in Lettie Moss's miserable flat-house, to which she presumed—and hoped, for purposes of revenge—the girl had returned.

The blue dawn was streaking in through various chinks of the heavily curtained windows. But no breath of the outer freshness could get in to palliate the heavy atmosphere there—an atmosphere of Turkish tobacco and cold incense—as Lilly Spencer stiffly began to change her dress.

A long and tedious process, for she would have to remove as well the heavy make-up she used when in the artificial light of her house, put on a make-up more suitable for the street.

She examined her heavily painted and sin-sculptured face in her mirror.

"My God!" she meditated; "but you're looking old."

Old! Old! And what lay ahead of her at Mrs. Moss's house?

But if the detective intelligence of the big town had, earlier in the night, sent its young men to Mrs. Spencer's place in quest of the girl reported missing by no less a personage than Josiah Pennington, that intelligence now, with the coming of the dawn, was none the less responsive to the magnetic drag which others felt.

A house in the Thirties! The landlady of it an old woman with a past! Letitia Moss!

"I'll take a look in on that place myself," said the Chief at Headquarters. "This is the first favour Josh Pennington has ever asked of me since he was a freshman and I was a sophomore—and I had him down and he wanted me to let him up. Crock," he added, aloud this time, to his policeman secretary, "you and I will have breakfast together. I want you to go along with me on a little run up into the Old Tenderloin."

The secretary, young and healthy, built for welter-weight honours in the boxing-ring, had he cared to go after them, looked up from the typewriter he was laboriously punching with a finger of each hand. He reassembled his thought.

"Chief," he said cheerfully, "at that, I think we ought to bring Lilly Spencer down here."

"She'll be here, Crock," the chief answered. "We've

got enough on her to send her away for twenty years—if she don't beat it for Philadelphia, or Chicago, or the coast! That's what I'm thinking about old lady Moss, as well. The woman's a crook. We've had her long enough. We'll give her the tip. She's old. Let her retire to the country—Hoboken, say ; or Schenectady, or——”

“The morgue,” laughed Crock.

None slept, once the magnet had them in its clutch. This was the Day of Days, Mrs. Moss's house the cosmic centre.

It was more or less like that with Pennington's self.

He also had passed the sleepless night. Not if the former Viola Swan, the present Mrs. Rufus Underwood, had been a princess of the blood, or a relative, or a sweetheart even, could he have been more devoted to her cause.

He had brought good will enough to her assistance from the first, yet no great enthusiasm. But the enthusiasm came later on. Only gradually did his imagination permit him to grasp the full scope of the drama in which he had been cast, if only for a minor rôle. Now it was unfolding itself to his mental vision with the vividness, and something of the grandeur, of the dawn.

His friend at headquarters had kept him informed of what the police were doing—how the girl had presumably been traced to the—after a fashion—hospitable home of one Mrs. Lilly Spencer ; how, in that place, both the girl and her trail utterly disappeared.

So much had Pennington communicated by telephone to her who had put the scar on his face.

In the solitude of his private quarters at the Gotham Club, Pennington meditated on all this as the night wore on. He knew now why he was trying so hard to do all that Viola Swan would have him do. To win her ulti-

mate commendation might not hasten the departure of that red brand from his face, but it would wipe out entirely the scar on his heart—which was more important.

“I’ll go to see her,” he told himself; “go just as early as I decently can—whatever Julia may say or think!”

But as he thought of Julia now, in connection with this present case, Pennington felt the stab of a self-accusation. Men toyed with tragedy; the women paid.

“Suppose you married Julia!”

That was the purport of what had flickered in his mind. He saw that this was possible. He saw that this was good. But there was no hesitancy in his mind, no question at all, as he declared to himself the more pressing business:

“But first—first—to Mrs. Moss’s house!”

Jessie Schofield and Alexander Breen had also turned their faces to the house in the old Tenderloin—as primitive mariners, innocent of compass, looked to the pole star on a stormy night. All the other stars of their heaven were in movement. Their solid earth had gone as unstable as the waves.

Only Mrs. Moss’s house gleamed fixed and magnetic.

Alec had finally succumbed to the corroding anxiety. He had asked Jessie—in a roundabout way, but clearly enough—just what had happened to her in Mrs. Spencer’s house.

Now, Jessie may have told the truth. Again, it is possible that she had not. Perhaps she was just drawing on imagination, on what she had read in “Metropolitan Life Unveiled, or The Mysteries and Miseries of America’s Great Cities.” You can hardly ever tell, when a girl like her gets fairly started on such a theme. Moreover, there was the spectacle of Alec Breen—

Such thick carnivorous passion in his throat,  
Tearing a passage through the wrath and fear—

as Elizabeth Barrett Browning said of the lion.

That was Alec, in any case, as Jessie warmed up, told of an orgy in Mrs. Spencer's house—senators and captains of industry present, and a "foreign nobleman"—floods of champagne—the giddy dance!

And right on, the worse the more of it, until Jessie had to have recourse to poetry again, not from Mrs. Browning this time, but from some verses in that favourite book of hers:

I durst not look to what I was before;  
My soul shrank back, and wished to be no more!

She was definite enough, however, when it came to recounting the details of her escape; so definite that Alec was forced to believe all the rest of the account—how there had been a girl named Pearl, how Pearl had finally advised her to "beat it," lent her the clothes Jessie then wore and also twenty-five cents for car-fare; how Pearl had diverted the attention of a certain swart guardian of the lower portal of Mrs. Spencer's castle until Jessie was safe away.

"This listens," said Alec, trying to be humorous in spite of the quiver that shook his lower lip, "like a fillum with Theda Bara in it."

"I adore Theda Bara," said Jessie with passion.

"And it looks to me," Alec continued, "like Mrs. Moss framed you for the part."

"Oh, not dear old Mrs. Moss!"

"Well, you got to go back to Mrs. Moss's with me," Alec quavered, frightened at his own courage; "and you got to repeat this in the presence of I and my witnesses."

"Why don't you introduce me to your friends?" Jessie invited.

Dawn, when Alec and Jessie, Doc and the gentleman in the grey flannel shirt, left the restaurant in Fourteenth Street. While Alec locked the door the others looked out upon the world about them.

Doc meekly contemplated the dust of the street. The friend of prize-fighters furtively contemplated Jessie. But Jessie saw the dim blue sky-scrapers upspringing to the greys and pinks of the infant day.

The high and gilded peak of the Metropolitan tower flashed out—"in spasms of awful sunshine," as her favourite poet would have said.

"And, oh," sighed Jessie, in a heart-throb that was almost audible:

"From the low earth round you  
Reach the heights above you:  
From the stripes that wound you  
Seek the loves that love you!"

"Gimme your package," said the youth in the grey shirt, with elemental chivalry. "I'll carry it for youse."

"Oh, thank you," Jessie smiled; "but there's nothing in it except a few éclairs."

Alec turned. They started north.

And all the time that these lesser threads of Destiny were shortening to the appointed hour and place, what of that greater bond that brought Rufus Underwood hurtling through the night!

Beck, himself, was like a meteorite rushing to its pre-destined spot on the surface of the earth.

Beck sat hunched up. One sensitive foot was on a pedal. His nervous and powerful hands held the steering-wheel in a grip which was at once light and strong.

For mile after mile he hadn't budged except to the almost automatic reflexes of his matchless driving. For him his body had ceased to exist save as an instrument of his intelligence. His intelligence had ceased to exist save as the instrument of some all-inclusive gratitude—somewhat as the human soul may become, so the philosophers say, the instrument of the Spirit.

Rufus, equally motionless, watched the flight of prostrate miles. The road was a spinning river stricken white. On the black shores reeled and fell inconceivable shapes in a perpetual hurricane. Farms, forests, rivers, whole townships, and counties, whatever was solid and substantial in ordinary times, were all stricken with the same breath of annihilation.

Rufus was a poet, something of the seer.

He read in this transmutation of earthly things something of the divinity of man. His own soul soared up and out ahead of the racing machine, which man had made and man directed, to a vision of the goal.

This was life.

Life was a rush like this through dissolving blackness.

There was no permanent reality, not even in the brief zone of visibility which lighted the road immediately in front.

Reality lay away off there in the darkness, in the magical city, toward which all humanity was speeding, each one in quest of the beloved mate!

Then only would it be Day, all things be revealed!

"It's getting light," said Beck.

"Yes," Rufus answered. "That's the east—almost straight ahead—and the stars have gone."

They hit a hill with a grade so stiff that the machine moaned as it gripped the rough surface of the road and

began to climb. Beck pulled a lever. He touched a button. The shine of the headlights deftly surrendered to a blue-grey pallor which suddenly immersed the world about them.

As if relieved by this change of atmosphere, the car sprang on refreshed. While Rufus was still marvelling at the changed outlook, the car was over the brow of the hill, coasting again—this time to the rocking panorama of a village.

A speck appeared in the road near the edge of the village.

The speck became a man. The man developed an aspect of human authority waving its arms.

The man and the village both were gone.

"He'll telephone on ahead," said Beck; "but it'll take more than a rube sheriff to stop us."

The road was steadily improving. Another village dangled across their sight. Another speck appeared which likewise developed into the semblance of a man—a man armed with a shotgun this time. Rufus glimpsed the face of the creature as they rocketed past him.

"Bang!"

"Not the tire, thank God!" Beck exclaimed.

This village, too, was gone. Out into the open country, into the softly widening dawn, the car was sprinting as if the race were only begun.

"He shot at us," said Beck, not without satisfaction. "It'll happen again."

"What if they stop us?"

"They won't stop us," said Beck. "I've got a hunch. This is one of those runs that go through to the finish."

"You're right," said Rufus.

He also felt the conviction that this was "one of those runs that go through to the finish." They were as mes-

sengers of the King. No earthly power or authority was so high and strong as that which sped them on.

The day sprang up. New York was near.

Thus the black sands of all these diverse destinies were caught, for the time being, in the same magnetic field ; the centre of this field a certain mean building in a certain mean street. Human thus far were these sands—as human as humanity may ever be considered simply that.

Now enter the superhuman.

For one more element was caught in the converging lines which led to Mrs. Moss's house. As straight as an arrow it came—out of the unknown, also a messenger of the King, also with an authority no man could question, no earthly power could stop or stay. The element has been pictured as the Rider on the Pale Horse.

The thing was Death !

## Chapter XVIII

### REVELATION

THROUGHOUT the latter part of the night Viola Swan had found herself alone—alone, that is, save for those spirit visitors which always come and go at such a time.

Rufus, Uncle Joel, Mrs. Jenvey, the preacher from the little wooden church, Aunt Allie, Andy Jones; then Alec Breen, Jessie Schofield, Mrs. Moss, Pennington—all these had kept her company in the spirit.

Ghosts! Ghosts! And all the time that other ghost—the Scarlet Ghost; but this one so real that at no time could she have said:

“Thou art Viola Swan. I—I—am Alice Linn; I am Mrs. Rufus Underwood!”

No; most of the time she herself was the Scarlet Ghost.

This was its birthplace. This was its habitat. This was its very atmosphere—an atmosphere which was killing to Alice Linn. It was Viola Swan who brooded there, who listened to the furtive footfalls, who unravelled and identified the blurred and tangled noises of the night.

She was alone when she received her several messages from Pennington, telling her that he had gone to police headquarters and there had been promised help; again when he had telephoned merely to inquire if she was all right, if she had any news; still again when he told her

that Jessie Schofield had been traced to Mrs. Spencer's house and that she had thence disappeared.

From what Pennington told her, and from what she herself had learned, but most of all through the gradual evolution of her soul's own vision, she had built up a pretty clear conception of what had taken place—Jessie's welcome in this house, the hoodwinking of Alec Breen, the girl's subsequent transfer to Mrs. Spencer.

The precise part taken in all this by Alec she did not perceive. But this didn't matter greatly. She knew Alec. He might put on the travesty of villain or hero, but his real character was that of the clown.

On her own account she bore Alec no malice. Not even the thought that it was he who had possibly lured Jessie to New York aroused in her any desire for punishment so far as he was concerned.

He was but an element in the conspiracy of circumstance. So also was she herself; so also Jessie's antecedents.

It was Mrs. Moss who was the villain of the drama—the old, the sagacious, the unclean, the polluter of the hitherto pure. The spectral presence of the old woman haunted these rooms as could none other. The very smell of these rooms was Mrs. Moss; so was the dimness of them; so was their response to the throb and cacophony of the Old Tenderloin. The soiled walls and the decrepit furniture were vibrant with her contact. They were saturated with the secrets of old Mrs. Moss's heart and brain, tainted to the same degree of corruption and decay.

At last Viola Swan could stand it no longer.

She felt a sudden craving for some sort of physical communication with Rufus if only indirectly. This craving she could satisfy in a measure by speaking to Jo, the

cellar-man, learning from him at least that her telegram had been safely sent.

It was always night, more or less, in Mrs. Moss's rooms. But as Viola crept softly out into the hall—where there was a flight of steps leading down into the cellar, under those which led to the upper floors—she noticed that the night was waning, that it was dawn. She recognised this with a little gasp, as one might receive some great spiritual truth when the soul itself gropes in darkness.

Opening the door at the head of the cellar-stairs, she heard the clang and scrape of a steel scoop on a cement floor. Even at this early hour Jo was at work.

She found him between the coal-bin and the small furnace used to insure a hot-water supply to the upper regions. She called him by name. He straightened up; eyed her, startled, through the gloom for the few seconds it took him to recognise her.

Then, straightway, he became all amiable attention.

"I got your change for you," he said. "I guess it was more than you thought it would be."

He hastily propped the scoop against the side of the coal-bin, made the preliminary passes at digging into his pocket.

"Thirteen words," he began.

"Thirteen!" Viola exclaimed. "There were thirty, Jo."

Jo was afflicted by a spasm of recollection. The spasm dazed then flustered him. He didn't have enough wit to frame a protective lie. He coughed, seized his scoop, shook down the coal with it and made a great show of stoking the furnace. Noise—plenty of noise! That was Jo's idea of escaping from a bad situation.

Viola waited patiently for a lull in the racket. She wouldn't admit it, but kept telling herself all the time that

Jo had simply made some minor mistake ; but the fact of it was, all the time that she was waiting for Jo to end his noise she was trying to beat out the flames that had started up inside of her like the flames in the furnace—flames that hurt her and frightened her more than anything which had happened thus far this night. She was always intuitional.

Jo came to the end of his noise, shuffled about dejected—like a fugitive overtaken in a cul-de-sac.

“What happened to my telegram?” Viola asked softly.

She could read a portion of his secret in the growing trouble of his white and black face. It was something to pour oil on that inner conflagration of hers. But, even now, she was telling herself that she must be calm, must be strong.

“I didn’t mean no harm,” said Jo. “In this life you got to do what you’re told to do. Look at me, shovelin’ coal down here when I’d ruther be out pickin’ apples or somethin’. Look at you! I bet you don’t like it here in this dern house any more than I like it down here in this dirty cellar. I’ve watched you, Miss Swan, with my own eyes. I’m nothin’ but a cellar-man—and a bum one at that—but I see often enough that you was doin’ things you didn’t want to do no more than I want to do what I got to do.”

“Jo, didn’t you send the telegram at all?” Viola asked—with a ray of hope almost. “It wouldn’t be too late to send another one. Put down your shovel. Tell me the truth. Don’t be afraid.”

Instinctively, she was using with him much the same method she would have used with a frightened animal.

“Mrs. Moss told me to burn your telegram,” Jo blurted in an agitated whisper. “She wrote another one to the same address—wrote it next door in Cooney’s delicatessen

store. I was there and see her do it. She told me to copy it out on a telegraph-blank."

"And did you?"

"Thirteen words," said Jo. "I copied it all right. I got what Mrs. Moss wrote right here, if you don't believe me."

With a sort of crisping suspense Viola waited. The flames were raging inside of her now. She was merely smothering them as best she could, dreading what might follow their bursting forth. It was with an air almost of indifference that she received a soiled fold of paper which Jo extracted from an old pocketbook and handed over to her.

She read that substitute message which had been sent—grotesque—as grotesque as a grimace painted on the face of a corpse. She read it slowly, over and over again, and was unconscious of it even when the paper slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the floor.

Jo retrieved it and returned it to his purse as something possessing value. He was talking again.

"She's wicked, she is, the old lady," he said cautiously. "She's got the devil himself skinned for sin, she has. I knew that I hadn't ought to switch these telegrams. A fellow could go over the road for that. Yes, sir! Even if it is poetry. But she told me to do it, she did; and you know how it is yourself when the old lady says something."

And so on.

But Viola didn't hear him.

It was to the conflagration inside of her to which she listened. A palace was burning up in there—or a temple; something she had designed and builded out of her hopes and dreams. And the edifice was tenanted by all those whom she loved. Even Alice Linn was doomed. Alice

and Rufus were there together. Out of the red inferno it was only the Scarlet Ghost whose name was Viola Swan which could survive.

She murmured a word or two of excuse and comfort for Jo's benefit, but they were words which not even she understood.

She turned and made her way back to the stairs. She walked with constraint and breathed with constraint, and was trying to think with constraint; only, she couldn't think. She could *feel*. That was all she could do, and the feeling by this time was a whirlwind of fire.

At the top of the stairs she halted. In the midst of her turmoil and red anarchy yet another sensation had come to her—a sensation strange and small.

She stood there wavering as she sought to identify it.

Something like peace it was, something like divine comfort. Yet, how could either of these things be hers at the present time?

Then she recognised it.

This was the same feeling which had come to her earlier in the night, there while she was lying on Mrs. Moss's bed—that feeling of maternity such as a young mother must know when her first-born nestles for the first time at her breast.

“Something to live for—*die for!*” whispered Viola Swan.

No, it was her other self which must have whispered that.

But it was Viola Swan who re-entered Mrs. Moss's flat and stood there, pale, transfigured, strangely exalted, in the presence of Mrs. Moss herself.

## Chapter XIX

“VENGEANCE IS MINE”

MRS. MOSS had been pottering about the far side of the room. She turned as Viola entered. Whatever the change that had come over the girl's appearance, it was something that made Mrs. Moss start slightly, draw back a little with a look of bafflement, of consternation.

“I was just thinking that you might want a bite of early breakfast,” said Mrs. Moss.

She kept her eyes on Viola. With no special volition on her own part, Viola kept her eyes on Mrs. Moss. Viola's voice was soft and reasonable when she spoke.

“I've seen that telegram,” she said.

“What telegram?”

Mrs. Moss was flustered, but as an old campaigner she was hastily looking to her trenches.

“The telegram you sent.”

“I didn't send no telegram, Viola. I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Don't call me Viola. I'm not Viola. I'm Alice Linn, if you will. I'm Mrs. Rufus Underwood. I sent a telegram to my—my husband. You intercepted it. You sent something else instead.”

She was still speaking with an effort to be gentle and reasonable. Perhaps Mrs. Moss misinterpreted her mood. She tried to inject an element of gaiety.

“Oh, that was just a little joke,” she babbled softly. She was momentarily convulsed with mirth. At least, she attempted to give herself the appearance of that. The mirth went out in a flash of something like indignation. “You know how to take a joke, don’t you, Viola?”

“I’ve asked you not to call me Viola!”

Not that it mattered very much. The girl was merely making an effort to save herself by thought; that was all.

Mrs. Moss decided to try the offensive.

“You appear to be sort of uppish all of a sudden,” she commented. “I don’t see what particular give you’ve got to be so particular about your name. So you’re Alice Linn, are you! That ain’t the name your sweetheart asked for you by when he come here last night and spent an hour with you—right here in my own bedroom, too. Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself trying to throw the bull with me, and me the only friend you got.”

“We did no wrong.”

Mrs. Moss’s retort was a grin and a leer.

“I tell you that we did no wrong,” cried Alice Linn, with a mounting emotion—a shade of suppressed hysteria. “I sent a telegram to my husband, I tell you; and you took it and sent him another instead. Oh, I don’t know what I ought to do! You’re wicked! You’re wicked! You made me wicked! You want to keep me wicked! I’ve tried—I’ve tried——”

She had taken a few steps forward, still blind to the purpose that was leading her on. Mrs. Moss displayed an unmistakable flurry of alarm. She sought to conceal this in a burst of rage.

“Don’t you talk to me like that, you snipe!” she gurgled. “Why, I made you what you was. You’d ‘a’ starved if it hadn’t been for me. Now you want to turn on me, do you? You was glad enough, Viola Swan, to

have me help you when you was down on your luck. You come back now to fool that poor rube husband of yours while you're receiving your swell friends. Why, honestly, Viola——”

“Don’t call me that!”

It was a cry straight from the heart. There was so much grief and desperation in it that Mrs. Moss was momentarily encouraged.

“Alice Linn, are you?” she mocked. “Alice Linn!”

She checked herself and plucked at the breast of the old woolen wrapper she wore.

“I came here to rescue Jessie Schofield——”

“So you said!”

“That was why I called on Mr. Pennington. He had a friend at headquarters——”

“What?”

Mrs. Moss gulped forth the word only after several efforts.

“*They’ll* come here——” the girl sobbed.

“*You* call in the police! You, you cheap little street-walker! Do you suppose the police don’t know you, Viola Swan?”

“Alice Linn!”

Mrs. Moss lost all control of herself. She began to froth at the mouth—as a puff-adder drools blackness. She tore at her dress as if she were short of breath. But her greatest hope of relief seemed to be based on some adequate expression of her rage and hatred.

“You—you’d try to queer me with the police? You, you scum? Why, they ship a hundred girls like you to the Island every day, you white-livered little street-walker! Bellevue’s full of your breed. So’s the morgue! Aye, and the morgue’s too good for ‘em! To hell with you, Viola Swan! That’s where you ought to go! That’s

where I'll send you—you, with your saucer eyes and your chalky face! Think you're beautiful, do you? Listen to this:

“I hope you die! I hope you die right here in this house! I hope you die as Viola Swan—with a curse on you!—and go back to hell where you was spawned!—with strangers there to look at you!—and glad to be rid of you!—and not even the dead-house to give you a box to lay in!”

“Don't—don't speak like that,” gasped Alice Linn.

“Die! Die!” fumed Mrs. Moss, with the air of a stricken witch; “and ghosts a-tearin' the heart out of you while you're doin' of it—”

The interchange was becoming more or less inarticulate—Mrs. Moss, choking and gurgling out her curses as she continued to shuffle backward, clutching at the withered folds of her throat, jerking at the soiled flabbiness of her unlovely dress; Alice Linn confronting her—Alice somehow white and radiant with the spirit that seemed to be in possession of her.

There was a blue pallor drifting into the room from the window that opened on the air-shaft, but the gas still flickered in the dim chandelier suspended from the ceiling. It was a squalid stage for any sort of a human drama; yet on just such a stage had Viola Swan first appeared, was destined soon to disappear.

Under the chandelier, like a pool of pale and unwholesome blood, the red cotton tablecloth lay—an emblem of tragedy. It was on one side of this that Mrs. Moss snarled and cursed, slopped backward pulling at her dress; on the other side, that girl possessed of a devil or an angel.

In a movement which might have been inspired by her torture the girl's own hands sought her breast.

They came up tense and slow. But at that instant there appeared in her eyes a look of sheer revelation. Her hands had come in contact with the knife which she had hidden there, forgotten. Slowly she drew the knife out and looked at it.

Almost any object devoid of material beauty may assume an aspect of spiritual grandeur when it becomes transmuted by a great meaning—like the relic of a saint, the face of a thinker, the hand of a mother of men. And it was like that now with this knife. The handle of it was black. The blade of it was short and discoloured.

But it was as beautiful to the girl who held it as if in very truth it had been a child of hers.

From it her dark eyes flashed up.

Mrs. Moss had also seen the knife. Her mouth was sputtering blasphemies, but she was hypnotised. Her voice was weak.

“Curse you, Viola Swan! Curse you! Curse you!”

As inarticulate as the rush of a sewer, but that was the burden of it all;—even now, when Mrs. Moss had seen the knife. She was undoubtedly smitten with fear. She tugged at her gown. She shuffled in retreat.

“Oh,” cried Alice Linn, with a look of Joan of Arc about her; “I’m going to kill you—kill you!”

It was soft and almost a sob; and yet there was a queer thrill of elation in it. Her voice rose. It still wasn’t loud, just tense and piercing.

“It was for this that I came to New York,” said Alice Linn. “I came to kill you—clean the earth of your presence. God sent me! He said: ‘Kill her! She’s lived too long! She’s taken my children! She’s sullied them! She’s broken their hearts! She’s poisoned their souls! She’s sent them to prison!—to the hospital!—to the morgue! Kill her! Kill her!”

“You’ll go to the chair,” Mrs. Moss managed to say.

“It’s Viola Swan that will die—die with *you*,” Alice Linn answered.

“You’re—forgetting—Rufus,” gasped Mrs. Moss.

“He’ll understand! He’ll understand! I offer myself as a sacrificial victim. It’s atonement! It’s like the Cross! I’ll be forgiven!”

Mrs. Moss had backed into a corner whence she could retreat no further, even had she possessed the strength to do so. She supported herself there. She looked as if she were stifling. Her mouth was open. Her scanty hair was coming down. A little wisp of it kept plucking at her rusty shoulder—like a grey and yellow finger bidding her to come away—to some one who was waiting and impatient—the some one being Death.

“They’ll put you in a cell——” This from Mrs. Moss.

“Father, forgive her——” This from Alice Linn.

“Beat you till——”

“Pray—— Pray——”

“—to hell!”

Suddenly, Mrs. Moss took a shambling step. It was while Alice Linn was still a good six feet away from her. Mrs. Moss appeared to be calling for help; only, she was like one in the grip of a nightmare—straining, straining, unable to utter a sound.

She was fumbling at her gown. Into her face there came a look of awed surprise. Those fishy eyes of hers which had been fixed on the Destroying Angel there in front of her appeared gradually, yet swiftly, to lose their focus.

Alice Linn, still at a distance, cast down her knife. She would have sprung forward, caught the old woman. She was aware of it, even then, that God had declared a truce,

and that the truce was death for the woman whom she herself would have slain.

But before Alice could move, Mrs. Moss collapsed.

She shook and drooped down—throwing up her hands as she did so, as if to ward off another blow from the Unknown, or somewhat as if she were appealing for mercy!

## Chapter XX

“WHAT GOD HATH CLEANSED”

**S**HE lay there huddled on the soiled carpet, face down, by the time that Alice Linn came creeping up to her.

For several seconds Alice had the appearance of one who has just witnessed a miracle, and knows it to be a miracle, and is fearful to intervene. But she turned the limp and heavy figure over on its back. She did this not urgently, yet with an air of wonder, as if still in the presence of something that she couldn't understand.

The old woman was still alive.

Just as Alice absorbed this truth into her own barely stirring consciousness, she heard the thrill of the bell in Mrs. Moss's bedroom—the bell of the outer door.

Who could it be?

Then she became aware of a movement in the hall. There must have been another miracle of a kind in the cellar of the house, for Jo had bestirred himself down there, had come up to open the door himself. Perhaps Jo possessed something of that second sight which seems to go so often with minds otherwise weak.

It was the chief from headquarters and his policeman-secretary—the first of those whom the magnet was assembling here. They were still in the hall when some one else arrived—the chief's friend, Pennington. The friends shook hands. The secretary, in civilian clothes, saluted.

The chief turned to Joe.

"Where's the landlady?" he asked.

"Back there," Jo gasped and disappeared. Jo must have heard his employer fall.

The three men went to the back of the hall. The chief himself peered through the glass panel of the door to see what might be seen—in a professional way—before making his presence known. He saw an old woman lying there, saw a girl kneeling at her side, saw this girl lift her own face and folded hand in an ineffable gesture of prayer.

The chief and his secretary were both more or less expert in the matter of first-aid, both inured to tragedy. Alice had accepted their presence there, mechanically almost; mechanically she had answered the few questions the chief had asked. But neither he nor his secretary appeared to need such information as she could give them, or to attach, for that matter, much importance to what she said.

"It's her heart," said the chief. "She's had a heart-attack. Crock, I'm afraid that it's all over with the old lady. Try to dig up some ammonia, or something; then get us a doctor."

Presently, Mrs. Moss was showing signs of reviving consciousness. She put up her nerveless hands, began to pluck at the sagging folds of her withered throat. She seemed to bring to this occupation a sort of pleasant and childish curiosity—as if she were touching something which she did not recognise, the presence of which surprised her.

Alice Linn remained there kneeling at Mrs. Moss's side, looking down at Mrs. Moss with pity and wonder, with a curious exaltation. It was a feeling which was

both a hope and a prayer, a lamentation and a song of thanksgiving.

Mrs. Moss was dying. Yet also was this the passing of Viola Swan!

The Scarlet Ghost was dead!

Alice Linn in the presence of this truth—a truth which came to her, so it seemed, from the very fountainhead of truth, was incapable of either speech or action.

Had she tried to speak she would have sobbed. No words, anyway, could possibly have expressed what she had in her heart. Had she sought to move she would have fallen. So instinct told her. She felt as if she were standing over a million-foot abyss—amid interstellar space—on a lonely pinnacle—nothing but infinite heaven overhead.

Mrs. Moss finally opened her eyes.

Over the old woman there had come some tremendous and indefinable change. She blinked up mildly. For a while she appeared to see nothing—nothing except the insubstantialities of a waking day-dream. Then she was aware of the girl leaning over her. She smiled. It was a pleasant smile, but devoid of recognition.

For that matter, Alice Linn was not recognising Mrs. Moss.

Where was all the sin and the violence, the treachery and ugly knowledge? Gone! Absolutely gone! Where were all the things which had been graven and scribbled there, year after year, since the old Cremorne days, as on a monument visited by unholy tourists? Equally gone!

Mrs. Moss's face was cleansed. Her expression was bland. What remained to her of earthly attention was fixed on Rufus Underwood's wife. The room was

deathly silent. Mrs. Moss's voice fluttered out, soft but perfectly distinct:

"What's your name, little girl?"

"My name is—Alice Linn!"

To any one familiar with all the circumstances, the question and the answer both would have appeared as a part of some magical rite—white magic—a formula of confirmation, a mystical christening.

It was clear that Letitia Moss believed she had never heard the name before. Perhaps she never had—this part of her which still remained alive.

"A pretty name!" she whispered. "A pretty name for a pretty little girl. Be a good girl, Alice!"

"Yes," whispered Alice.

Mrs. Moss let herself go for an interval in pleasant reveries.

"You'd better run home, Alice," she spoke again, "or your folks will be getting worried." She smiled. She reflected. "I've got to be going along myself," she whispered, more softly than ever. "Good-bye! Be good! Be—"

Into Mrs. Moss's face there crept swiftly a look of growing blindness. There followed this a flash of awe—

"She's dead," said the chief.

As he said this, there was a conviction which reached to the very soul of Alice Linn—or perhaps the conviction came out of her soul—that it wasn't the voice of the chief at all, but the voice of her Maker.

All this was quaking through the inner silences of her being when she heard, from the hall, a burst of hysterical laughter in a voice which she recognised as that of Jessie Schofield, a babble of speech in which she likewise recog-

nised the voice of Alec Breen. She struggled up from her knees and looked about her.

At first glance, the room seemed to be filled with strangers—not all strangers, for she recognised Pennington. There were a couple of women present, both of whom looked miserable. One of these women, young and fairly beautiful, was clinging more or less to Pennington. The other—her misery made hideous by a combination of sin, cosmetics, and old age—was talking to a stout young man whom the former Viola Swan recognised instinctively as belonging to the police.

“You stay right here, Lilly,” the young man ordered.  
“Lilly Spencer!”

The name had a familiar sound to Rufus Underwood’s wife—an echo from the disappearing world in which the Scarlet Ghost had lived.

The chief and his secretary, aided to some extent by Pennington, had removed what was earthly of Letitia Moss to the little bedroom, and closed the door before Jessie Schofield and Alexander Breen, followed by Doc and the youth in the grey shirt, were admitted.

“There she is now,” cried Mrs. Spencer. “Ask her—”

But Jessie, forthwith, had seen Alice standing there, rushed to her with her arms out, was received in Alice’s arms.

“I’ve had a perfectly gorgeous time,” Jessie sobbed; “but—but—”

She flung her face against Alice’s breast and cried—this time without restraint, careless of the strangers present.

Altogether, it was some time, and there was some confusion, before things began to straighten themselves out. But Lilly Spencer was strong for self-justification.

She managed to get herself face to face with Jessie Schofield here in the presence of all these witnesses.

"I ask you," she thrilled, "if I done you any wrong, or if any one done you any wrong while you was with me!"

"None!" Jessie answered, abashed. "You were lovely!"

And Jessie even tried to back this up by giving Mrs. Spencer the kiss penitential. But the policeman-secretary interfered.

"That settles it, so far as *she* is concerned," said the secretary; "but you move, none the less—to-day! and the further the better!"

Mrs. Spencer had a spasm of tears. She was beaten.

Alec Breen had also made a movement to interfere as Jessie started to demonstrate just how lovely she considered Mrs. Spencer to be. He actually put his arm about Jessie's waist.

"Hold on," he counselled.

"What are you going to do with her?" Mrs. Underwood demanded softly, with a recurrence of heat.

"Jessie and I are going to wed," Alec announced, with a flash of effrontery.

He turned to Doc and the youth with the grey shirt. His voice was a sob—a sob of relief, the confirmation of a conviction which he had been nursing all along. He had suspected that Jessie had let her imagination get the better of her.

"She's as pure as the driven snow," he announced.

And he also began to cry, Jessie consoling him.

The lady named Julia turned to Pennington. She was moved. She was contrite.

"You're better than I thought you were," she whispered; "and I am worse. Forgive me! You and I have

looked on life and death together, now. I love you. Let's get out of here!"

But before any one could move there was a fresh movement in the hall, a suggestion of clamour. The magnet was drawing in the last of its mortal iron.

Beck, Pennington's chauffeur, threw open the door, looked in. He turned.

“Come in!” he called.

He turned to Pennington, still with the accumulated excitement of high speed upon him.

“I've got him here, sir!” he cried, with a voice suppressed.

Mrs. Underwood gave a little gasp. Every muscle and fibre of her went dynamic even before she saw who the latest arrival was.

Then he was standing there—upright, a flare of blue light flashing from his eyes, eyes that went straight to those of the woman God had given him.

“Rufus! Rufus!”

## Chapter XXI

DAY!

THEY were alone there for a while. The others went away—out into the hall, there to wait for them.

There was speech between them, but such speech as no words can ever formulate—speech needing no words—the speech of perfect comprehension, of that perfect love it is occasionally given mortals to know, thus keeping alive the legend of heaven and the angels.

The words crept in only gradually—like the living things at the creation of the world. And for Rufus and Alice the world was new-created.

“The folks at Rising Sun—will be glad to know—that everything’s all right,” said Rufus.

“Uncle Joel will understand,” Alice murmured.

“Yes,” Rufus answered slowly; “and so will Aunt Allie, and Andy Jones, and the preacher, and every one. Mrs. Jenvey will want to go down on her knees to you for what you’ve done——”

“Nothing——”

“Nothing—except to make the world better—and more beautiful,” said Rufus, with that inevitable touch of the seer and the poet about him.

Out in the hall, there was a gradual disassociation of the human elements brought to Mrs. Moss’s house—as if, now that the chief dweller in the place was dead—the magnet had lost its virtue.

Pennington and Julia went away with Beck, after much hand-shaking and repeated farewells. So went the chief from headquarters and his secretary, leaving a policeman in charge of the premises against the coming of the coroner. Solitary was the flitting of Mrs. Lilly Spencer—as one who flees in darkness; in deeper darkness still her only respite from the fate which she must have known was overtaking her.

Jo, the cellar-man, crept up to speak to Mrs. Underwood.

"So the old lady's dead," he whispered. He was moon-eyed, overcome with awe. "So the old lady's dead! Say, do you know of any one who needs a cellar-man? I've held this place for twenty years."

They would have offered him a place in the country, but Alec Breen broke in. Alec was himself again—the future sandwich-king.

"We want a dish-washer, Jo," he said. "How about it?"

Jo went foolishly glad.

"He'll get all that he wants to eat, too; won't he, Alec?" Jessie exclaimed, with her hand on Alec's arm.

It was clearly to be seen that Jessie was reaching out to a fresh apogee of romance—a romantic marriage, this time, with no telling what horizons beyond. She would make a proper wife for a sandwich-king—the wife of one who would barter for concessions at Coney Island, at State fairs, wherever the world was in picnic mood. And she looked as if she might well become the mother of many children, as well. To that end nature had designed her, however unaware of the fact she might have been.

"A great day for the race!" Alec exclaimed, peering out at the sunshine of the young morning.

"What race?" asked Rufus.

"The human race," cackled Alec, speaking a deeper truth than was his wont.

"What shall we do?" whispered Alice, smiling up at Rufus.

"First," said Rufus, "we'll see these two people made one. They belong to each other. It'll give us something to tell the folks in Rising Sun about what happened down here. Then—you and I—to the old home!" They were out on the sill of the house of death. Rufus thrilled:

"Look at the sky—our sky—up there!"

"I see it," Alice answered. "I see it reflected in your eyes."

THE END

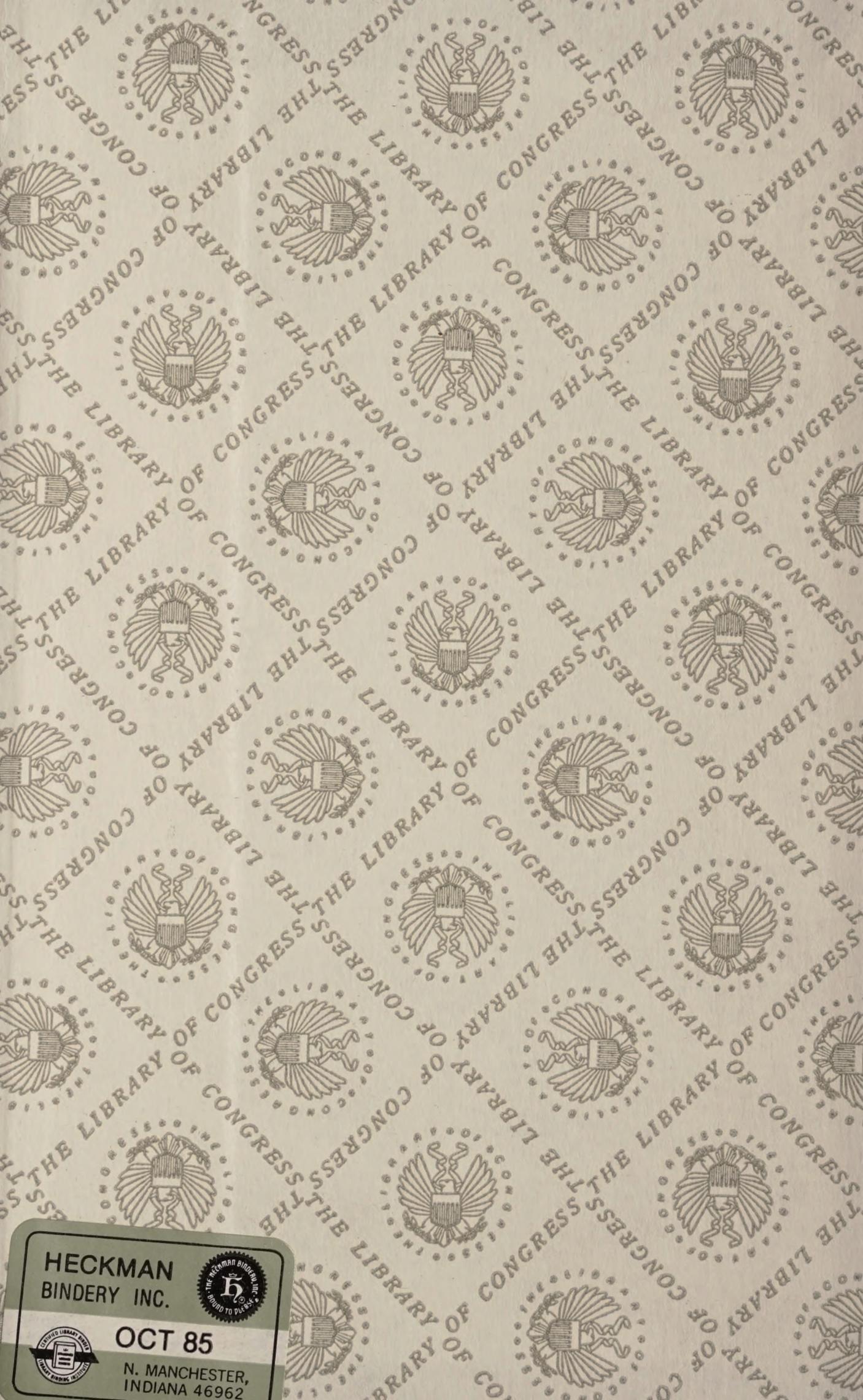
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